FEBRUARY 28 2026

FT Weekend Magazine

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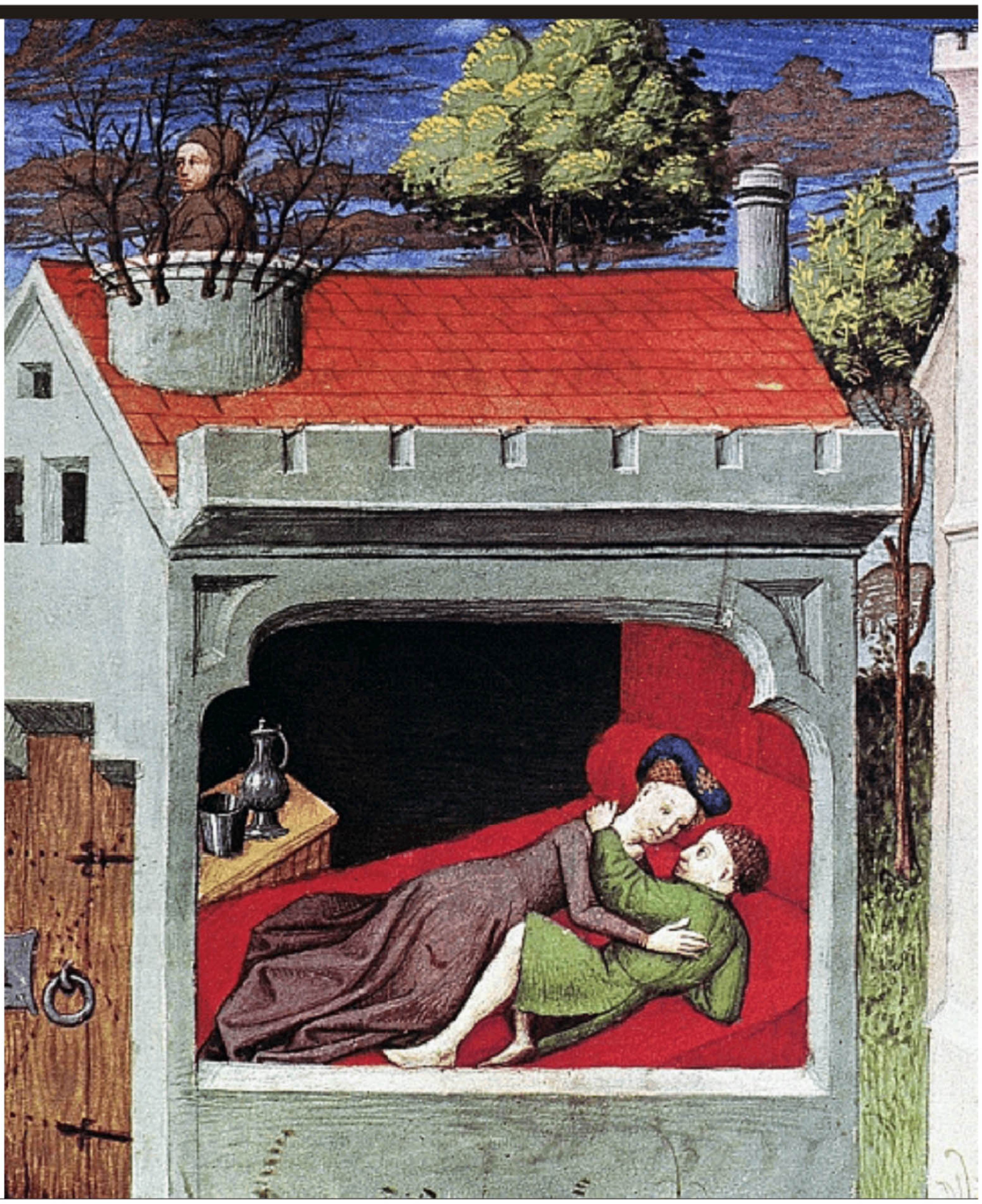

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MARGINALIA *by* NADINE REDLICH

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Letters

THEY CLONE POLO PONIES, DON'T THEY?

by Samantha Weinberg

Very interesting article. I didn't get the importance of nurture on horse-cloning outcomes until I read this, but it makes perfect sense. The polo ponies are beautiful animals.

FACT BASED VIA FT.COM

This piece will surely convince a few to hop on a plane next November to see a few matches at the Polo Open in Palermo. Add a Boca Juniors game at the Bombonera stadium for a perfect week.

BANG A GONG VIA FT.COM

I have very mixed views about this. A family member has played polo many times. I adore horses and have spent a great deal of time riding, owning and caring for them. Polo is hard on ponies – particularly their legs and mouths. This article is interesting but it doesn't delve deeply enough into the successes and failures of the breeding techniques. The long-term consequences of gene editing must also be a concern.

BOUDIKA VIA FT.COM

THE MAN WHO SAW TOO MUCH

by Cynthia O'Murchu

A fascinating exposé of the murky world behind those "passport for cash" ads you see flickering on airport screens.

ECLECTICVIEWS VIA FT.COM

WHAT ONE DAY OF EAVESDROPPING IN LONDON TAUGHT ME

by Amelia Tait

It's important to recognise the joy in being on the other side of the eavesdropper. Cities can be deliciously anonymous – one of my treasured memories was explaining, in high-fidelity detail, an unhinged break-up in a closely packed restaurant. The lady on the table next to us, who had been very unsubtle, choked so hard on her soup that she coughed for a few minutes and refused to make eye contact.

LITERATURE REVIEWER VIA FT.COM

Even more fun than eavesdropping is knowing that you are being listened to, and making up fantastical conversations for the eavesdropper to believe, and repeat. My hobby.

HATCHBACK VIA FT.COM

DINOSAUR WARS IN THE GOBI DESERT

by Stephanie Findlay

I've read Roy Chapman Andrews's accounts of his Gobi expeditions… totally amazing. Sad to see exploitation happening on such a scale for dino bones. Rich people will buy anything.

THEOLDEMOLE VIA FT.COM

I wish them well. It's a regressive period, so a lot of history is being lost. Paleontology in particular has had a difficult time of it. Here in Texas, they are discussing just bulldozing a paleontology site to build a data centre.

COVERTACTION VIA FT.COM

THE MORAL CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

by Tim Harford

People tend to band together and get behind governments in a crisis, whether it be economic (the Wall Street crash, the global financial crisis) or security related (wars, 9/11). But once the crisis moment fades, if things don't improve over time, people start to get disgruntled. US politics as the Great Depression dragged on, for example, got pretty gnarly. Fundamentally, it is easier to be more tolerant, munificent and positive-sum in one's thinking when you feel like you are tracking well enough yourself. The psychological needs for envy and disdain just aren't there.

BOTANYWHIG VIA FT.COM

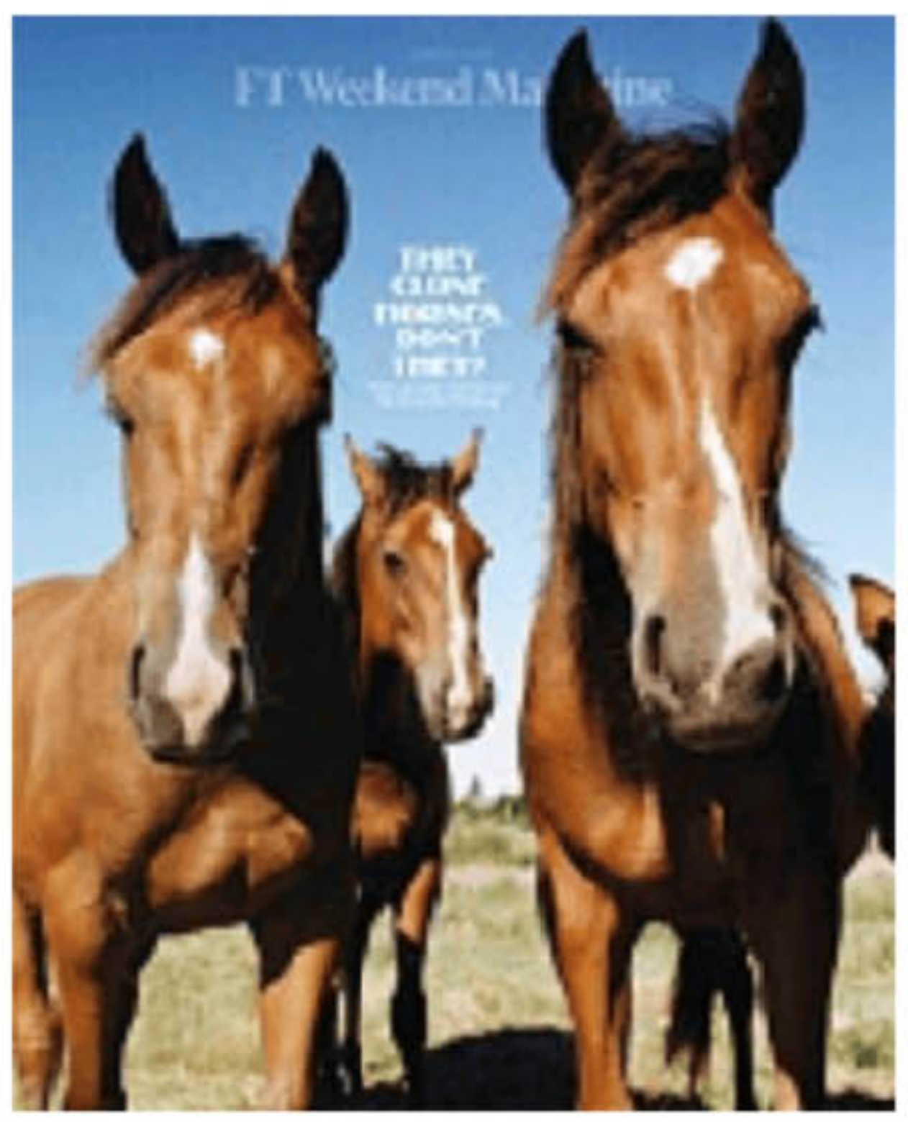
WHY IS THE UK SO VULNERABLE TO POLITICAL CORRUPTION?

by Simon Kuper

It is understandable that Simon Kuper should describe the vulnerability of contemporary British politics as stemming from a code of honour between "good chaps" (or chums) without any recourse to censure or sanction save via the backdoor of public office to the front door of private enterprise – but that code is one of an evolving establishment of power and influence.

A factor absent from Kuper's argument is the inevitable rise of the career politician who has the benefit of those networks but has no vocation to learn the art of governance for the common good. The expression of that vocation to govern is based on the ethics of responsibility and of conviction, independent of any specific ideology or belief, save for the declamation that "I am right and you are too stupid or base to recognise it" until caught out still shouting "Nevertheless!"

CHRISTOPHER STANLEY, LONDON



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NEXT GEN HORSE CLONING

TO CONTRIBUTE
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HOW TO SUM UP SPANISH WINE IN SIX GLASSES

by Jancis Robinson

So happy to see Catalonia at the top of the list. Anything outside of Rioja tends to get a bad rap internationally because of cheap exports, especially the cheapest of cavas, but there's a lot to explore. I would love to see some grapes off the beaten path in future wine articles. Sumoll is the most amazing grape you've never heard of.

QIRMAZI VIA FT.COM

I especially enjoyed the explanation of how sparkling wine is made and bottled. I was amazed the first time I saw it being done, which was at a winery and wine school in Saumur.

AMERICAN PERSON VIA FT.COM

THE PORTER'S TABLE, LONDON

by Jay Rayner

Dublin shouts Guinness, while London's Covent Garden doesn't. It's true that the porter once brewed there – much appreciated by market porters, apparently – eventually morphed into stout (from stout porter) and in turn into the ubiquitous Guinness. The choice of location to celebrate it today, however, seems to have more to do with tourist footfall than any strong connection to the place. They're milk-stouting it.

JMINTHEHOUSE VIA FT.COM

CAN AI IMPROVE MY PERSONAL LIFE?

by Robert Shrimsley

AI is impressive in bursts, but it only becomes genuinely helpful when it is embedded enough to understand context, memory and relationships. Your Valentine's Day example captures that perfectly. Generic suggestions are easy. The hard part is knowing the person. Without that, even a beautifully phrased idea misses the mark.

JACOB CLAERHOUT VIA EMAIL

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INSIDE Deception in the bedroom **P14**

Intellect

Undercover Economist

Getting past groupthink

by TIM HARFORD

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALBERTO MIRANDA

One of the most famous experiments in social psychology took place in the early 1950s. Solomon Asch, a professor at Swarthmore College, gathered together groups of young men for what he told them was an experiment in "visual judgment". It was no such thing.

What happened is often known as the "conformity experiment", but that is a misleading label for an oft-misunderstood study. Asch ran many variations on his experiment, and the most surprising and powerful lesson is not about the power of conformity, but about the power of disagreement.

Asch's basic approach was to show two cards to a group of about eight people. One card had a single line on it: the reference line. The other card displayed three lines of different length. The task was a straightforward multiple choice, picking the line that was the same length as the reference line. This wasn't hard; when people were asked to do this task on their own, they almost never made a mistake.

However, Asch was not asking people to do this task in isolation, but as a member of a group. Participants would be asked, one by one, to tell the rest of the group their answer. This made space for the possibility that experimental subjects would be guided not by their own eyes, but by the opinions of others.

The groups were asked to do this 18 times, but Solomon Asch had a trick to play. Everyone in each group was a confederate working for Asch, except a single unsuspecting experimental subject. This poor dupe would be sitting near the end of the line. The confederates had instructions to get the first two questions right and then unanimously agree on the wrong answer for most of the rest.

Imagine the jolt of surprise and anxiety as the experimental subject saw one person after another contradict the evidence of his own eyes. People felt real pressure to conform, with more than one-third of the answers matching the group's delusion rather than the obvious truth.

Why? When debriefed, some people said they had changed their minds, figuring the group must be right. Others said they didn't change their minds, but did change their answers, not wanting to spoil the experiment. Still others were staunchly independent, saying that they presumed the group was right and they were wrong, but felt a duty to call them as they saw them.

What fascinates me about Asch's experiment is what happened when one of the confederates had been instructed to disagree with the group and give the correct answer instead. The answer: the spell of conformity was broken. People made only a quarter as many errors, with the error rate falling below 10 per cent. The pressure from the group had lost much of its power.

> People will go against the evidence of their own eyes if contradicted by a unanimous group

Even more brilliant was another variation in which Asch again instructed a confederate to disagree with the group. This time, however, the confederate was an "extremist dissenter", giving an answer that was even more wrong than the majority consensus. The result? The experimental subjects generally gave the correct answer; their error rate was still below 10 per cent.

Asch had demonstrated three things. First, people will go against the evidence of their own eyes if contradicted by a unanimous group. Second, group pressure is much weaker if even a single person dares to disagree with the group. Third, and most remarkable: it does not matter if the dissenter is mistaken; dissent punctures group pressure either way. People are liberated to say what they believe, not because the dissenter speaks the truth but because the dissenter demonstrates that disagreement is possible.

I thought of Solomon Asch when I heard about a cookbook by Julia Child and Jacques Pepin, *Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home*. It's full of the classics, but there are two very different recipes for each dish – one by Julia and one by Jacques. In the margins, each offers a jovial explanation of what the other cook has done wrong, why they made different decisions and what effect those decisions have on the final meal. It is, writes philosopher C Thi Nguyen, "the record of an argument – a rowdy conversation between friends".

This matters because, as with Solomon Asch's duplicitous experiment, it shows us that disagreement is possible. The two cases seem very different, not least because while there is only one correct answer to Asch's visual perception test, there is more than one way to sauté a fish. Yet the disagreement is valuable either way, because it gives us permission to think for ourselves.

MANY YEARS AGO I WAS INVOLVED IN scenario planning for the oil company Shell. It was always a fascinating exercise, but I now realise that one of the most important strengths of the process was rarely discussed: there were always at least two scenarios, and all the scenarios were given equal status. This was *Cooking at Home* meets corporate strategy: the fundamental assumption was that there was more than one plausible future, and a rowdy conversation about the different possibilities unlocked a treasure chest of fresh thinking.

Charlan Nemeth is a psychologist and the author of *No! The Power of Disagreement in a World that Wants to Get Along*. She cautions against "contrived" dissent – for example, the Catholic tradition of having a "devil's advocate" to argue against the canonisation of a putative saint. This sort of thing sounds good in principle, she argues, but in practice there is a limited benefit in a rote play-acting of disagreement. For one thing, everyone knows the devil's advocate is just pretending, so nobody feels much pressure to persuade them to change their mind. "Role-playing," writes Nemeth, "does not have the stimulating effects of authentic dissent."

Yet some contrivances are better than others. Nemeth writes approvingly of an investment firm only making decisions after considering serious arguments both for and against a position. What makes this different from playing devil's advocate? Perhaps the sense that the contrary arguments are not a game, but made in all seriousness.

Another contrivance is the idea of "red teaming" an idea – giving a group the task of trying to rip a new idea apart before that idea is adopted. Is this an empty ritual, or a serious practice? Depending on people's intent, it could be either.

Contrived dissent is better than nothing, especially if the contrivance itself is taken seriously. But the most valuable form of dissent is authentic, even stubborn and brave. There is no substitute for finding one of those people who feel a duty to call things as they see them. **FT**

DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS *from* LESSER-KNOWN
FT BUREAUX

ROMANCE

S.W.A.L.K.

Excerpt from "The Gift" by The Velvet Underground; lyrics spoken in the violist John Cale's Welsh baritone.

By Friday afternoon, Waldo was set
He was thoroughly packed and the post office had agreed to pick him up at three o'clock
He'd marked the package "Fragile", and as he sat curled up inside
Resting on the foam rubber cushioning he'd thoughtfully included
He tried to picture the look of awe and happiness on Marsha's face
As she opened her door, saw the package, tipped the deliverer
And then opened it to see her Waldo finally there in person
She would kiss him, and then maybe they could see a movie
If he'd only thought of this before
Suddenly rough hands gripped his package and he felt himself borne up
He landed with a thud in a truck and was off… *

*Continues for several more minutes before ending somewhat abruptly

SOURCE: 'WHITE LIGHT/WHITE HEAT' BY THE VELVET UNDERGROUND (1968)

ECONOMY

It's how much?

Price of a first class stamp in 2000: **27p**
(58p in today's prices)
Price of a first class stamp since 2025: **£1.70**

SOURCE: 'THE ACCELERATING RISE IN STAMP PRICES', FLYINGTWIGS.COM

WORK

Confessions of a postman

Taken from Yorkshire postie Kevin Boniface's diary of his daily round.

Dec 22, 2014: "A woman with a bag for life is talking to a group of other women with bags for life. 'I don't feel the cold any more because I've got… What is it I've got, Joyce?'
'Diabetes,' says Joyce. 'No!' says the woman, suddenly remembering. 'A onesie.'"

SOURCE: *ROUND ABOUT TOWN* BY KEVIN BONIFACE (2018); *DIARIES OF NOTE* BY SHAUN USHER (2025)

LAST WEEK'S THEME: WET WEATHER

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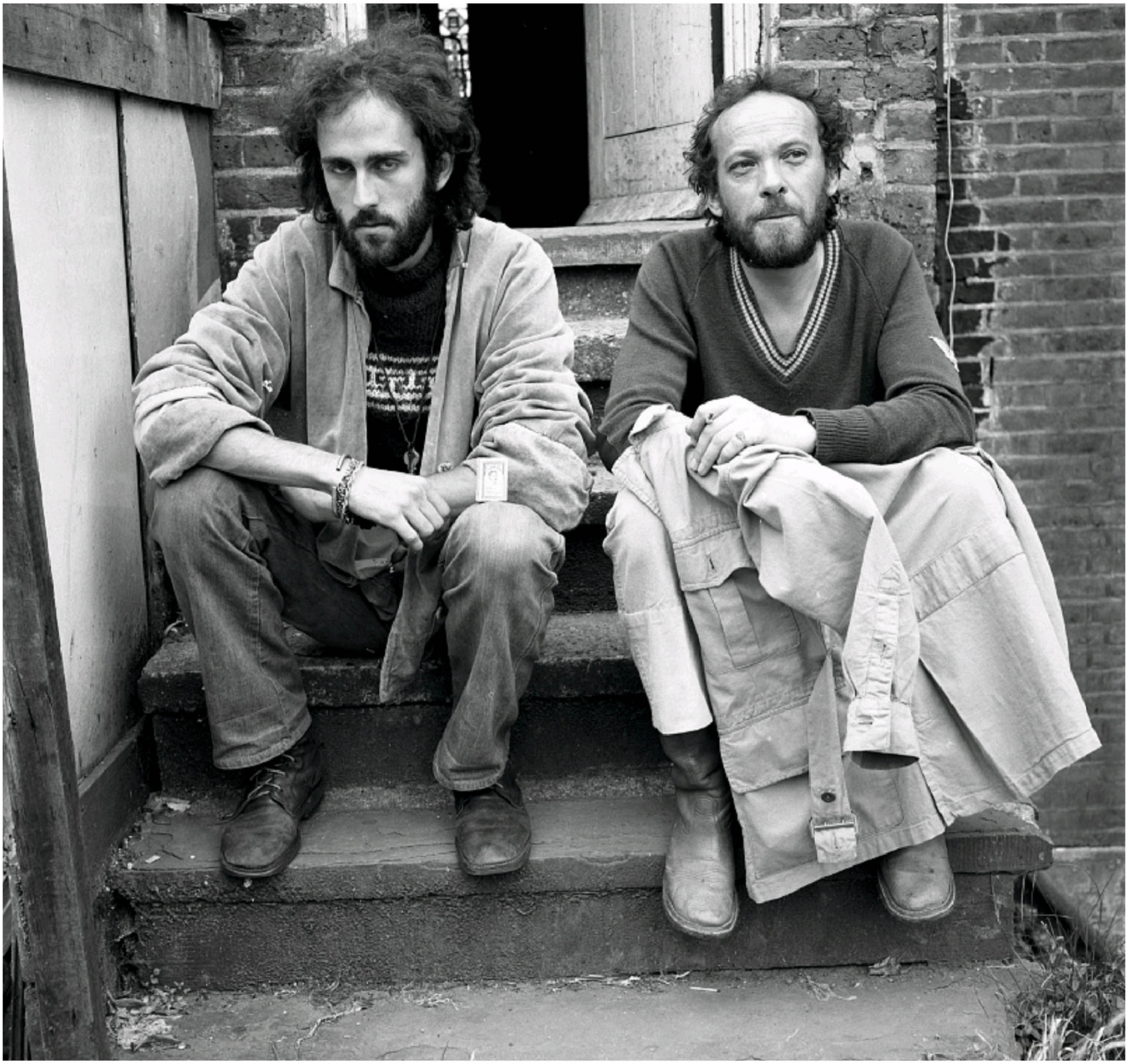


PAUL PEARCE (AKA TALL PAUL), LEFT, WITH FRIEND AND NEIGHBOUR CHARLIE 'BANANAS' WADE, OUTSIDE 103 BISHOPS WAY, 1977

GALLERY

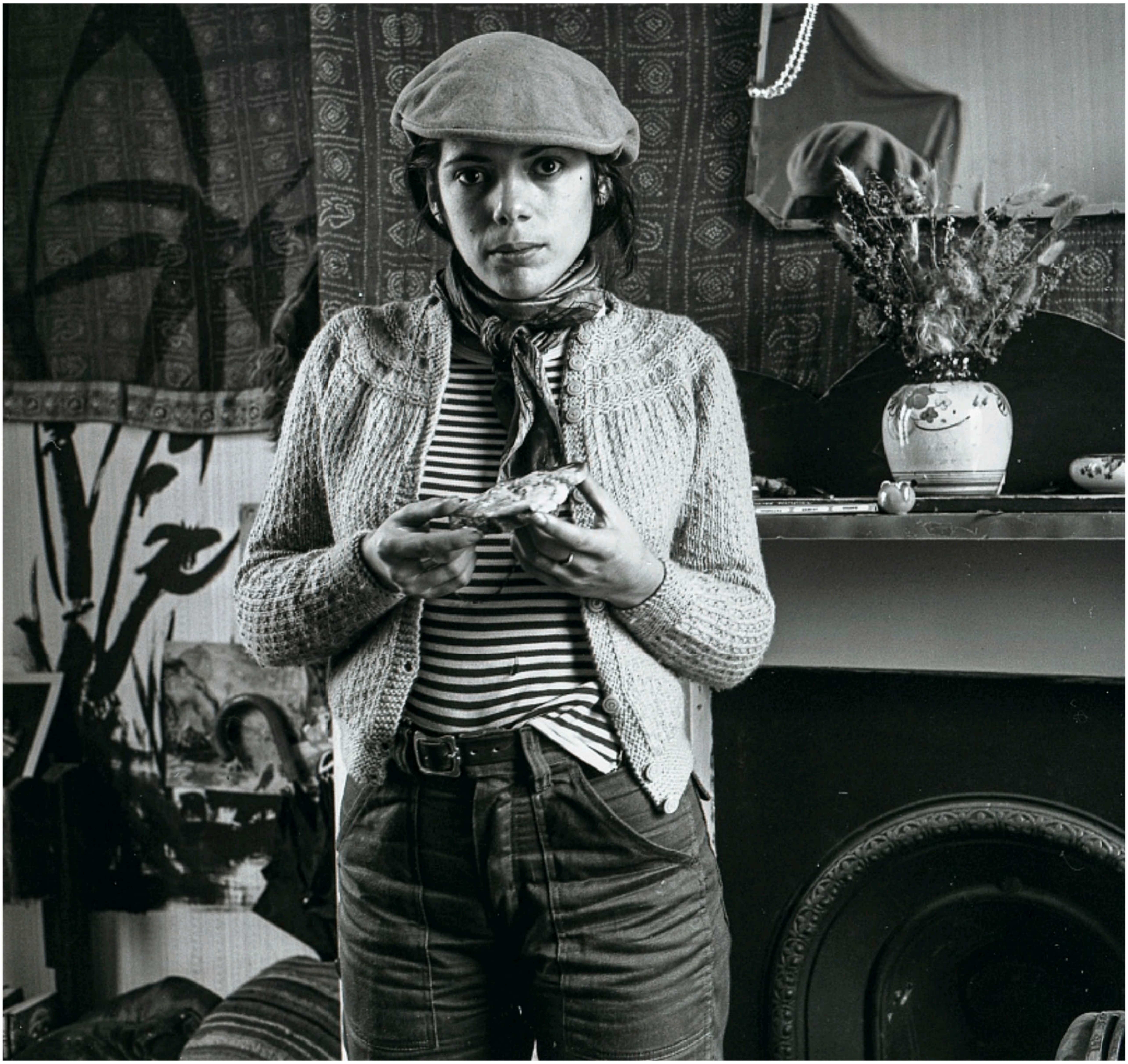
JOYCE EDWARDS

by JOSH LUSTIG

In 1950 Joyce Edwards' father bought her a house. The home, in London's leafy and affluent Hampstead, cost £2,000 (approximately £60,000 in today's money) and marked the beginning of Edwards' life not just as a landlady, but as a documentarian. Over the course of nearly 50 years, from the 1970s onwards, she made photographs of the eclectic and eccentric tenants who passed through her Hampstead home.

It also led her further afield, to the less salubrious area of Bethnal Green in London's East End. Victoria Park was where Edwards spent most of her time. The three streets that make up The Triangle were set to be demolished in order to make way for the London Ringways motorway scheme. The residents were evicted, but the plan was eventually scrapped. The empty houses then became occupied by a group of young squatters in search of an alternative way of living.

After her death in 2023, just before her 100th birthday, Edwards' archive of photographic portraits was rediscovered by her friend, filmmaker



JULIA CLEMENT, 66 SEWARDSTONE ROAD, BETHNAL GREEN, 1977

Derek Smith. Together with local arts charity Four Corners, he secured National Lottery Heritage Fund support for an oral history project, film and exhibition. "Joyce was unconventional in many ways," Smith tells me. "In spite of having a refined English accent, [she was] fascinated by the London counterculture that was thriving at the time."

Smith was amazed to discover that many of the squatters who Edwards photographed in the 1970s and 1980s were still living in The Triangle today. Having established the Grand Union Housing Co-operative, the artists, musicians, students and radicals who lived there were able to persuade the Greater London Council to allow them to restore their homes and to sell them the freeholds of 63 properties. The co-op still thrives today.

Julia Clement, who was 20 when Edwards photographed her in the squat she was living in, still lives in The Triangle. She told Smith, "I'd come to London at 15. I was a runaway. I'd run away from home in South Wales. It was safer to come to London than be in South Wales, because in South Wales I was on the streets." For Paul Pearce, AKA Tall Paul, who is shown here with neighbour Charlie "Bananas" Wade, "There was this feeling that people could do anything they wanted to in the squats, certainly that was one of the great things about The Triangle, that we were free to live the way we wanted." FT

'Joyce Edwards: A Story of Squatters' is at Four Corners, London, until March 21, fourcornersfilm.co.uk

World View

The grim rise of videoed death

by SIMON KUPER

ILLUSTRATION by HARRY HAYSOM

We have got used to watching killings. The latest viral video, filmed on a grey street in the French city of Lyon, shows members of the "anti-fascist" Jeune Garde group kicking and beating three figures who are lying on the ground. One victim stays down. He is Quentin Deranque, a 23-year-old far-right Catholic activist and bodyguard for an anti-immigrant feminist group. The scene of his death has transfixed France. It evokes a country of political street battles, where nobody is safe. Jeune Garde had links to the far-left La France Insoumise party. "The extreme left kills," said far-right leader Jordan Bardella. "Violent radical leftism is on the rise," agrees the US state department.

Videoed death has become a prime mover of politics worldwide. To cite only American examples, think of the killings of George Floyd, Charlie Kirk and Renée Good. These images derail all other political arguments because they trigger our deepest fear of violent death.

Robert Capa's 1936 photograph of a Spanish Republican soldier flinging out his arms, apparently as he takes a bullet, was sensational because it was practically unique (though it's now thought that Capa may have faked it). Today, such images are everywhere.

Violent death is the most compelling story. In fact, few storytellers can construct a gripping narrative that doesn't rely on it. Accordingly, anyone whose windows on the world are YouTube, Netflix and TV news can end up thinking that murders happen all the time. Even some unfilmed killings change politics. In the UK, the murder of three girls in 2024 sparked false rumours that the killer was a Muslim asylum seeker. Nationwide riots against asylum centres began the next day.

Violent death is most impactful when the victim is an individual with whom mainstream audiences can identify. In Stalin's dictum, a single death is a tragedy, while a million are a statistic. That's why the videoed killing of Good, a white suburban mother, galvanised anti-Trump Americans the way the many unseen deaths of Hispanics in ICE detention facilities could not.

Political movements aim to harness the emotion of individual killings. Terrorists often livestream their own atrocities, while Trump has made many public appearances with relatives of people killed by undocumented immigrants. He's an instinctive hacker of human behavioural quirks, and the one he is triggering here is what psychologists call "mortality salience", the awareness of one's own coming death. When your mortality salience is heightened, it drives out all other considerations. You just want to survive. One common response is to retreat into your own nationality, religion or other safety group. Another is to move right, because a macho protector like Trump promises to protect you from violent outsiders.

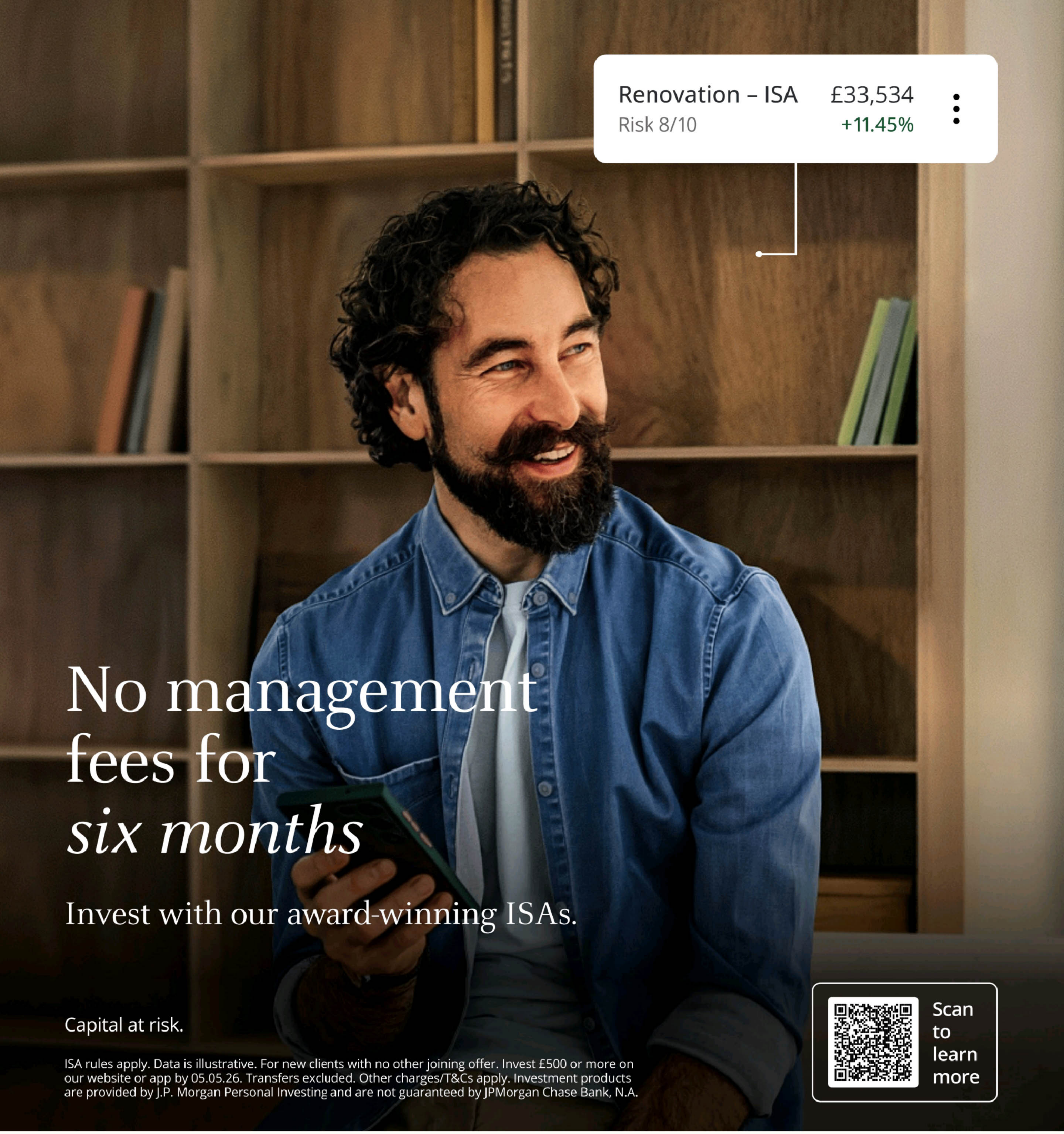
> Political movements aim to harness the emotion of individual killings

The rise of videoed death is encouraged by the decay of norms. Hardly any TV news bulletin before 2000 would have shown a killing, but on today's internet anything goes. And because everyone now chooses their own news feed, different political groups see different deaths. Laken Riley, a white American murdered by an undocumented migrant, has become a Maga martyr, yet few American liberals have ever heard of her. In the same way, Israelis watch mostly Israeli deaths whereas outsiders see Palestinian ones, meaning that each absorbs a different narrative.

The paradox is that we're surrounded by images of killing in an era when violent death itself, outside war zones, has become very rare. The US homicide rate is probably at its lowest since 1900, reckons the Council on Criminal Justice, a non-partisan think-tank. London's rate may be its lowest in centuries, argues the conservative journalist Fraser Nelson.

Yet death is all the scarier when life expectancy is high. The more years we have to lose, the stronger our fear of being killed. The daily online heightening of our mortality salience has encouraged the credulous rightwing notion that London is like a war zone.

My own peak experience of mortality salience was the night of the Parisian terror attacks in 2015. I live around the corner from the Bataclan music hall, where 90 people were massacred. Days later, trying to soothe myself, I was reciting consoling long-term homicide statistics to a friend. He replied: "Tell that to your brain." He was right. We live in an era when images overpower stats and words. Videos of death overpower everything else.



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Essay

Blind submission

For centuries literature laughed at the 'bed trick' – lovers switched in the dark. Today, the joke is curdling.

By *Izabella Scott*

Saint Augustine described the bedroom as "a room removed from witnesses". This is where the bed trick happens, a place of privacy and darkness where carnal fantasies thrive. The bed trick is one of the oldest literary tropes in the world, a story of sexual misrecognition and deception. In its simplest form, it describes going to bed with one person only to discover someone else entirely – another man or woman, a god, an animal, a stranger. Some tricks are engineered by magic but more often they are made possible by darkness.

I have long been fascinated by the trope, which caught my attention as a student of literature many years ago. Bed tricks feature in medieval folktales, Italian *opera buffas*, adventure novels, dark comedies and works of magical realism. I pored over the variety of bed tricks in Neapolitan fairy tales, Tristan romances and *One Thousand and One Nights*. Targets include women on starless nights: the miller's wife in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, tricked by a wily student in the dark; the innkeeper's wife in Boccaccio's *The Decameron* who mistakenly has sex with an opportunistic Florentine guest; the deadly Milady in Alexandre Dumas's swashbuckler *The Three Musketeers*, duped when D'Artagnan hides in a closet and takes another man's place; the suburban wives in Roald Dahl's adult story, "The Great Switcheroo", deceived by scheming, sex-obsessed husbands. Elsewhere, it's men who are fooled: Jacob in the Old Testament, when Leah switches places with her sister, fooling the infatuated herdsman in a dim nuptial bed; the Count in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, who fails to recognise his own wife during a night-time rendezvous; a string of disdainful men in Shakespeare's plays; the insatiable rake in Eliza Haywood's 18th-century novella of disguises, *Fantomina*.

In bed-trick tales, the technology of deception is comically simple. Taken literally, the plot is absurd. Could bodies be so indistinguishable in the darkness, identities so easily overridden? What about a loved one's smell, voice, body shape and even sexual technique? These are often gleeful tales, where the duped party actually enjoys the night-time mischief. The miller's wife, for example, is amazed by her husband's newfound stamina as the student secretly takes his place. (As Chaucer puts it, "On this good wife did he vigorously lie. No such merry time she'd known in years gone by.") Dahl's story saves its final twist for breakfast, when one duped wife, in a peach nightgown, tells her husband that his lovemaking has finally pleased her – a punchline that leaves him blanching. The clash between pleasure and cruelty, implausibility and success, is what gives the plot its comic bite. The tales hint at something more disquieting too: the way lust blinds, and how easily we can project fantasies on to whatever body lies beside us.

The idea that sightlessness can make recognition fail so spectacularly is both perverse and oddly persuasive. It draws on the special authority western culture has granted to sight. In *De Anima*, Aristotle theorised the five senses as we know them today, placing vision at the top of the sensory hierarchy and touch at the bottom. The bed trick pushes this faith to an extreme, exposing what happens when the supposed arbiters of truth are suddenly removed.

Perception far exceeds what the eyes alone can offer and other senses surely guard against such a mistake: the feel of a person's hair, their murmurs, odour and weight. While some bed tricks turn on sameness (featuring sisters or twins), more often random people switch places in the dark. The plot suggests that, in bed, anyone might be mistaken for anyone else, but the blunt physical difference of the substitute invites pause. Could the miller's wife, for instance, be so easily duped? Could she not feel that the (young, slender) student's body was different from that of her (fat, bald) husband, a drunken, tempestuous, pug-nosed man who Chaucer tells us "snored like a horse"? Did doubt creep in, but she allowed herself the pleasure anyway and partook in the role play? Or was she in fact subjected to sexual assault?

Often desire can operate as a kind of drug, as if sexual hunger can make anything, and anyone, believable. Spells of illusion give this intoxication shape in another variety of bed-trick tales, which indicate how sexual "magic" can blind the senses. In Greek myth, Zeus uses divine glamour to appear in Alcmene's bedchamber in the guise of her husband; in his deceptive, magical embrace, Hercules is conceived. Arthurian legend repeats the pattern, when a lust-struck Uther Pendragon, aided by Merlin, tracks down Igraine at the cliff-side Tintagel Castle and enters her bed "in the likeness of her lord" – begetting Arthur. In these tales, magical misrecognition engineers heroic births, as the trick is recast as a blessing.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also enacts a bed trick in the form of eye-trickery. A love-juice from a purple flower is dripped on to sleeping eyelids; when they wake, characters fall madly for the first creature they see, in a plot that is both bewildering and funny. The potion speaks to lust as a kind of narcotic that scrambles recognition, becoming a cipher for sexual adventure, seductive beguilement and the clouding of

A SCENE FROM BOCCACCIO'S 'THE DECAMERON'

reason. In Titania's famous scene with the amateur actor Bottom, the juice dropped on her eye incites a kind of deluding lust; under the moon, in the magic of the night, with the liquor in her eye, she can't really see and believes Bottom is an "angel", her dream suitor. Distorted sight points to the enchantment of lust and the way desire is irrational – we can be blinkered by it, transfixed, moved almost against our will by a force that bypasses looking, knowledge and even conscious thought.

In another cluster of tales – rowdy medieval folktales and fabliaux – darkness and lust combine, and the emphasis falls on the dumbness of sexual drive. These are comedies of appetite. Their women are not passive sleeping beauties but cunning tricksters. In night-games, brides slip drugged pigs into the marriage bed, or clasp fish-heads between their thighs; a bare backside is stuck out of the window and an excited lover mistakes it for a face, kissing the arse greedily before realising he's the victim of a "bum trick". The humour is harsh: pigs mistaken for women, humans reduced to animals, everyone at the mercy of their own bodies. In this register, bed tricks suggest that sex is not the language of romance or intimacy but a blunt physical impulse, where all bodies are equivalent. In these stories, darkness and lust collapse differences, insisting on the interchangeability of flesh – a vision that is cruel and humbling and, for that reason, grimly compelling.

In the heyday of the bed trick in Renaissance England, the device underpinned an array of theatrical plot lines from romantic confusions to tales of treachery and murder. Playwrights of the era were fixated on outdoing each other in increasingly tangled and ingenious plots. The bed trick was part of a collection of stage tricks, which included the "cradle trick" (a switched baby) and the "head trick" (a misidentified face following a beheading). Turning on misrecognition, these devices provided dramatists with the opportunity for final-act revelations, misadventure and twists in the play. Shakespeare's most prominent bed tricks surface in "problem plays" such as *Measure for Measure*, where a corrupt deputy enforcing sex laws becomes entangled in a bed trick. The deceptive deed takes place in a dark, walled garden, when Isabella, a nun, sends a substitute in her place.

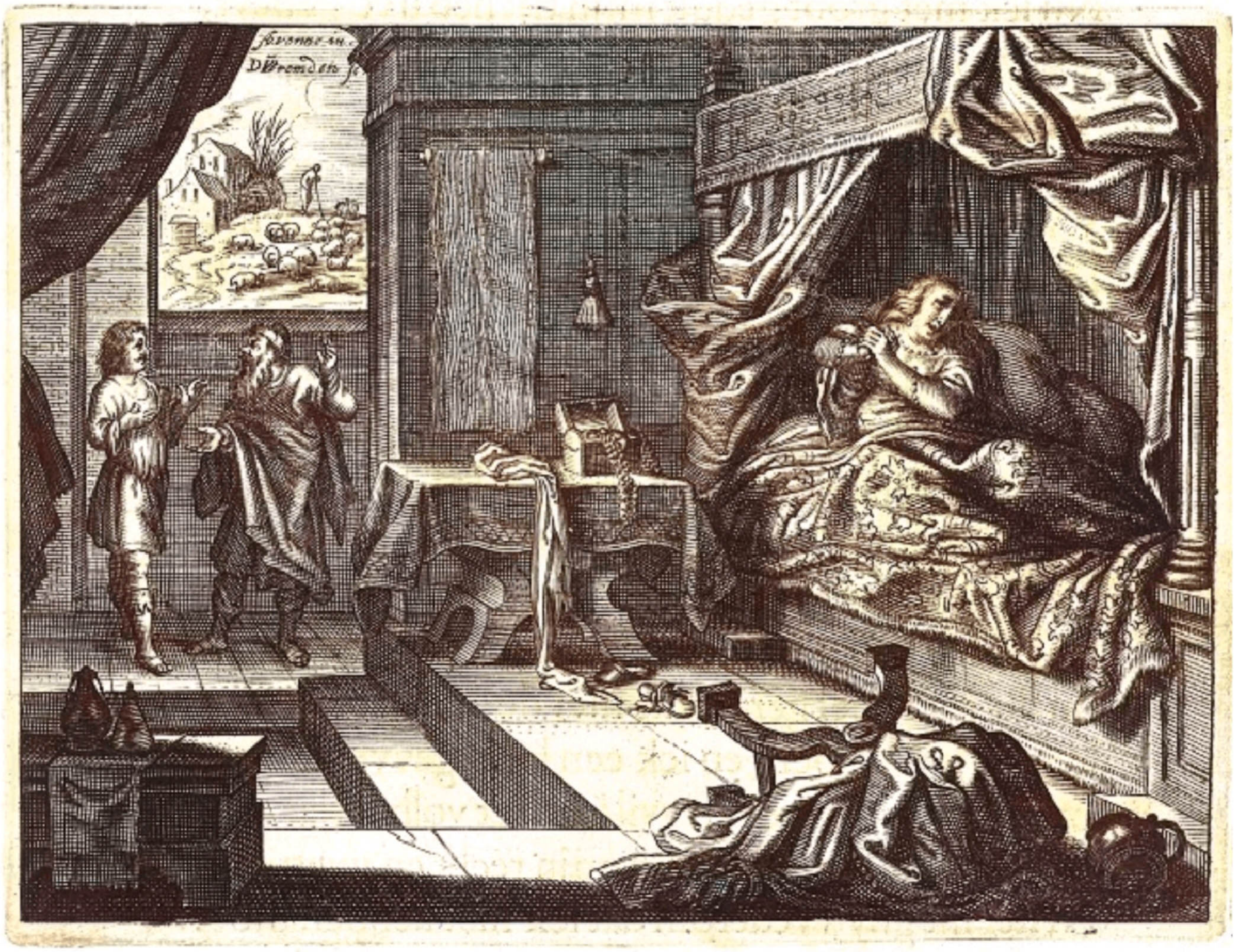
As the scholar Wendy Doniger argues in her survey of bed-trick literature, the device lost popularity over the following centuries with the arrival of night lights; illumination no longer depended on the moon or a candle, and the darkness necessary for a successful deception became less plausible. With the later spread of gas and then electric lighting, the trick appeared even less credible, and by the Victorian period *Measure for Measure* was rarely staged, in part due to its bed trick. Critics bemoaned the "blind submission" necessary for the device to work, and the following decades saw an increasing intolerance of the bed trick's lack of realism and general foolery.

> The idea that sightlessness can make recognition fail spectacularly is both perverse and oddly persuasive

By the 20th century, the bed trick had come to seem cheap, mechanically comic, implausible – tolerable in fairy tales but unthinkable in life, where a consummated bed trick was considered vanishingly rare. And yet, the bed trick persists today – not so much in the plots of books and plays but in newspapers and courtrooms, unexpectedly playing out in real-life accounts stripped of humour. Take the ongoing "spy cops" scandal, where undercover policemen used elaborate false identities to enter sexual relationships with activists. The women later stressed they had never consented to sex with these "random" actors, believing they were in love with entirely different men. Or the strange, sad case of Gayle Newland, one of several recent prosecutions for "rape by deception", as the bed trick is recast as a sex crime.

WHEN I FIRST READ ABOUT NEWLAND'S TRIALS a decade ago, I was bewildered and astonished: here was a British student accused of a real-life bed trick, a plot rarely taken seriously in modern life. A woman granted anonymity, whom I call Miss X, accused Newland, her best friend, of tricking her into sex by pretending to be another person – a man named Kye Fortune. She explained that, over two years, they messaged online, fell in love, got engaged and had sex many times. But whenever she met Fortune in person, she said, he insisted she wore a blindfold. Eventually, she claims to have discovered that Fortune did not exist and that, all along, it had been Newland in disguise. Newland herself denied the allegation and said Miss X always knew who she was having sex with.

I was unsettled by the allegation. In her account, Miss X essentially said she was the victim of a bed trick. Instead of darkness or a fairy potion, there was a blindfold. She claimed to have been devastatingly tricked for months on end. What surprised me most of all were the trial verdicts. Newland was convicted twice – first in 2015, then



BIBLICAL BED TRICK: JACOB DISCOVERS IT IS LEAH IN HIS NUPTIAL BED, NOT HER SISTER

PENTA SPRINGS LIMITED / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

> The case came to resemble a strange, magical bed trick. It resisted division into deceiver and deceived

again at a retrial in 2017 – and sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison. I wanted to understand how a jury had been convinced by a plot so rare in real life, and a story that, in literature, has been dismissed as implausible. So I requested the court transcripts and spent five years researching and writing *The Bed Trick*, a book about Newland's trials, the crime of "rape by deception" and the history of its literary counterpart, in an effort to understand what the trials could tell us about sex, consent, deception and the fictions we are willing to believe in the name of love.

Reading the transcripts, the tangled evidence, I found it increasingly difficult to apportion guilt or innocence. At first, Miss X's allegation seemed far-fetched. All the instinctive objections that make bed tricks implausible surfaced at once: what about her best friend's smell, her body shape, her voice? Could a strip of fabric really make someone so familiar feel like an entirely different person? In most literary bed tricks, the deception is a single mistaken encounter that already strains belief; here, by contrast, Miss X described months of blindfolded meetings, a ruse she claimed succeeded again and again. At times, the allegation seemed to demand a level of naivety that bordered on the incredible, and the defence seized on this, describing the complaint as "incapable of belief" and appealing to the jurors' common sense.

Yet, as I read further, the neatness of that scepticism kept slipping. Evidence revealed that Fortune was not an empty name but a fully furnished persona, with social media accounts, fictional family members, illnesses and online friends. Police traced profiles and messages that seemed to record a second life. Newland called it "role play", insisting that she and Miss X were closeted lovers, who used Fortune as a cover story for a lesbian relationship they were ashamed to live openly – a version that, as a queer woman, I recognised all too easily. Still, during the hearings, no coherent motive emerged for why Miss X would persist with the allegation and endure two trials, beyond the reasons she gave. I knew, as a former complainant in a sexual assault case, the gravity of that choice.

The case came to resemble a strange, magical bed trick – but one that resisted any simple division into deceiver and deceived. Both parties seemed under a spell, as the two friends entered a topsy-turvy world in which desire and fantasy blurred the boundaries of knowing and not knowing, wanting and choosing. Even so, these were sexual offences trials, and the legal focus was deceptive sex, not shared illusions. And despite all the evidence, nobody but Miss X and Newland were in the bedroom – that room removed from witnesses described by Saint Augustine – and so the trials became a contest of stories. Lawyers worked to persuade the juries that this was either a real-life bed trick or an allegation so extraordinary as to be beyond belief, crafting competing stories at opposite extremes in order to win. I was left with something less tidy, in the murky territory where consent, delusion and self-deception overlap, and where no verdict can feel quite final. In court, however, the bed trick proved an affecting plot.

Today, we live in a world more brightly lit than any imagined by Chaucer or Shakespeare, but the bed trick has not disappeared. Disguises now take the form of undercover personas, false profiles and carefully curated biographies. We like to think that better knowledge and better lighting have made romance safer, and that sex is now governed by clear-eyed, binary consent. Newland's case sits uneasily in this landscape, suggesting that sex and desire remain a realm of projection and fantasy. The bed trick's old question of who we are really in bed with, and whether knowing and not knowing can be so easily parted, still shadows our most intimate encounters. **FT**

Izabella Scott is the author of 'The Bed Trick: Sex and Deception on Trial', out now with Atlantic Books in the UK, and with Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the US in September 2026

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Pavel Durov
St Petersburg
elegram
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BY HANNAH MURPHY & ADRIENNE KLASA

KING OF THE OUTLAWS

THE MESSAGING APP TELEGRAM MADE ITS SECRETIVE FOUNDER PAVEL DUROV A BILLIONAIRE AND A HERO TO TECH LIBERTARIANS. THEN THE ACCOUNTABILITY BACKLASH BEGAN

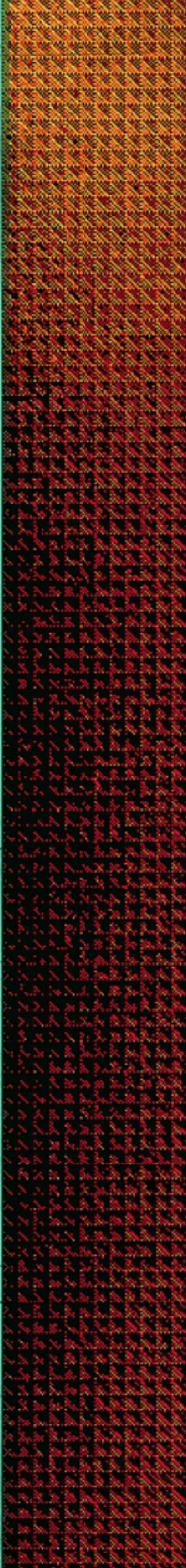

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS: CARLO APOSTOLI & SIMON KUHN

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Pavel Durov, the billionaire boss of messaging app Telegram, steps off his plane in France and is swarmed by a Swat team of police officers. He pulls off his shirt to reveal a torso so sculpted that it momentarily confuses his opponents before they come to their senses, cuff him and march him off to a cell. "Privacy is over!" a faceless goon shouts, zapping him with an electric current. Durov awakes to find a chip implanted in his head and the task of breaking out of a high-security prison before him.

This is the plot of *Total Glitch*, a game hosted on Telegram that dramatises a fictitious French prison break by a hero who recovers from bouts of intense combat with ice baths and yoga. Durov, a 41-year-old wellness evangelist who in real life recovers from bouts of intense exercise with ice baths and yoga, says he had no role in the game's development, but he has promoted it on his channel. "Only on Telegram could independent developers pull this off... and the results are wild," he wrote last October in a Telegram post viewed more than five million times.

The scenario the game imagines is not entirely far-fetched. In August 2024, Durov, who was born in Russia but has French and United Arab Emirates citizenship, was detained by French police within minutes of stepping off a private jet at Paris-Le Bourget Airport. He was held over alleged failures to moderate criminal activity on Telegram, from drug trafficking to terrorism and the dissemination of child sexual abuse material. After four days in custody, he was released and placed under formal investigation on a dozen preliminary charges and barred from leaving France. A trial, which is unlikely to come before the end of the year, could determine whether Durov will be convicted and face fines, or even a long prison sentence.

One of the biggest messaging platforms in the world, with more than a billion users, Telegram is marketed as a safe haven for communication, as well as a one-stop shop for broadcasting, file sharing, shopping, gaming and more. But its claims to be ideologically and technologically unassailable from the prying eyes of authorities, combined with a hands-off approach to moderation, have made it the default channel for anyone operating at the margins of legality, according to critics. It's where you might find gruesome videos of explosions and beheadings alongside semi-official communications from militaries and intelligence agencies.

The French charges against Durov have serious implications for every other social media platform and the liability of their top executives. "Arresting a CEO of a major platform over the actions of its users was not only unprecedented – it was legally and logically absurd," Durov wrote in a Telegram post, a year after his brush with police.

Since then, European lawmakers have shown ever more interest in holding tech CEOs accountable for alleged abuses on their platforms. This month, French and European investigators raided the offices of Elon Musk's X in Paris, as part of a wide-ranging investigation into its algorithms as well as the spread of AI-generated sexual abuse material. Spain is introducing laws to ban under-16s from social media and hold executives personally liable for hateful content. Last week, Russia stepped up its disruption of Telegram, throttling some features as part of an effort to force users on to a state-backed "national messenger" built for surveillance, and accusing Durov of pursuing his own self-interest while enabling terrorism and crimes against children.

For the libertarian tech titans of the US, and their political allies, Durov has become a martyr to European censorship. In the 18 months since he was released from custody, Durov has displayed increasing disdain for French authorities, accusing them of pressuring him to silence certain European conservative voices on Telegram and suggesting his detention was politically motivated. (French officials point to a strict separation between the judicial and political systems. The prosecutor's office leading the investigation declined to comment for this story.) After the recent raid on Musk's Paris office, Durov posted that France was "the only country in the world that is criminally persecuting all social networks that give people some degree of freedom... Don't be mistaken: this is not a free country."

To some observers, the investigation looks like a responsible attempt to force a secretive leader to shed some light on the allegiances and inner workings of his multibillion-dollar empire. Unlike the bosses of rival platforms such as Meta or xAI, Durov wholly owns Telegram, funding it through a personal fortune estimated at $17bn, which comes from his ownership stake, as well as personal bitcoin investments. And although he has frequently dangled the idea of an initial public offering, it remains unclear if he is ready to loosen his grip. In early 2024, in an interview with the FT, he claimed to have rebuffed offers of equity investments that valued the company at more than $30bn. According to analysis of documents obtained by the FT, interviews with former insiders and publicly available information, he has tied Telegram's revenue prospects in part to a niche cryptocurrency whose underlying technology was originally developed by his team, rather than relying on mainstream advertisers who might demand more disclosure.

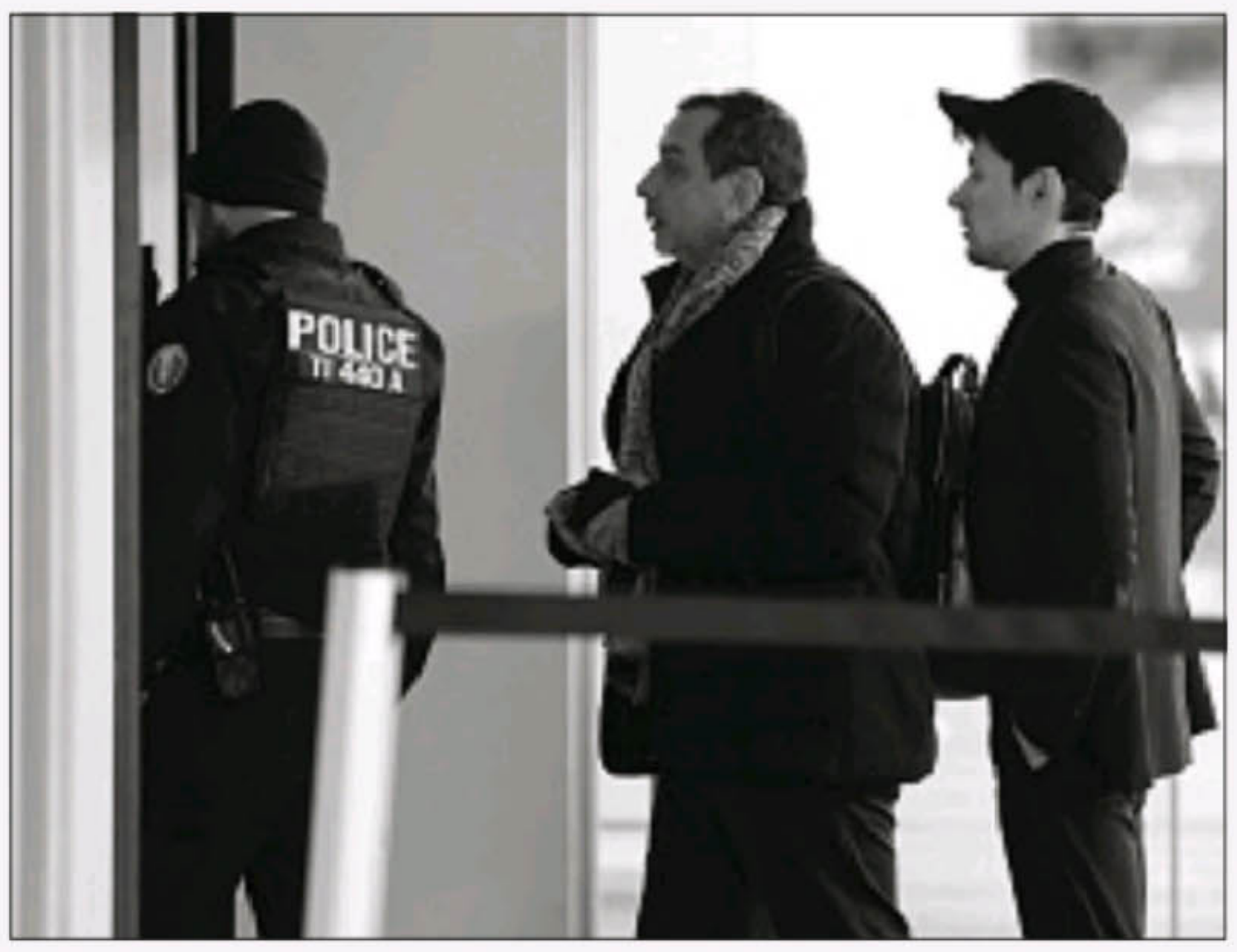
As the months pass, the circle of people wanting answers from Durov is growing. Corporate bondholders, who he has tapped for more than $3bn, including a $1.7bn offering last May, are asking whether the company will ever make good on the plan to float on public markets, now further delayed by the investigation. Some had been attracted by an option to buy shares in any future flotation at a discount of as much as 20 per cent. One bondholder raised concerns that the company's IPO promises represent an "investment trap".

Durov is now caught between two fires. In the west, the scant information around Telegram and its owner has done little to quell speculation that Durov still has ties to Moscow, despite his repeated denials. In Russia, a criminal case was opened this week against him for "aiding terrorism" and allowing Telegram to become a tool of western intelligence. In response, Durov claimed that Russian authorities were "fabricating new pretexts to restrict Russia's access to Telegram as they seek to suppress the right to privacy and free speech". Amid the conflicting narratives, Durov's critics argue, it is hard to believe in anything other than his singular ruthlessness.

"Durov lives in a world of spin where he will decide on a story then grow a back-story and it will become the truth," said Axel Neff, a Telegram co-founder who is now estranged from Durov. "He views himself as a man of the people. But how does one person become the sole shareholder of a company probably worth around $50bn? You've got to step on some people. To the victor, go the spoils."

THE "MARK ZUCKERBERG OF RUSSIA", AS DUROV became known in his twenties after founding the country's answer to Facebook, VKontakte, cast himself as an impish, anti-establishment folk hero from the start. Born in St Petersburg to a Ukrainian mother and Russian father who was a prominent professor of philology, Durov always intended to build "a one-man show and to do it alone, and that hasn't changed", said Nikolay Kononov, author of a 2025 book about Durov and Telegram, *The Populist*. "He's a one-man state... the king of the outlaws."

TELEGRAM 'IS MORE LIKE A RELIGION THAN A COMPANY' TO DUROV



Durov (right) arrives at a Paris courthouse for a hearing in December 2024

THOMAS SAMSON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Durov seemed unafraid to publicly troll authorities, even while the Kremlin tightened its grip on the internet sector during the early 2000s. In 2011, in response to demands from Moscow that he shut down the accounts of Russian opposition leaders on VK, as the platform became known, Durov posted a picture of a "resistance dog" in a hoodie with its tongue out. When Russian police raided VK's offices in 2013 over an alleged hit-and-run incident with a policeman, Durov posted, "When you run over a policeman, it is important to drive back and forth – so that all the pulp comes out." Telegram has denied he had any involvement in the hit-and-run and called the accusation an attempt to discredit Durov during a period of corporate upheaval at VK.

It was in 2012, Durov has said, that he and his older brother, Nikolai, a maths prodigy, started developing Telegram as a "private tool" for the pair to communicate securely. In his telling, Durov left Russia in early 2014 after more pressure from Moscow to share Ukrainian user data with the government, selling his VK stake under duress to oligarchs. He eventually settled in Dubai.

Shortly after his exit, Durov was sued by United Capital Partners, a Russian investment group that had bought a 48 per cent stake in VK. It argued he had "embezzled corporate funds, breached his fiduciary duties to shareholders and diverted corporate opportunities to himself" by setting up Telegram using VK resources. Durov was "attempting to present himself as a political dissident in order to divert attention from his serious legal challenges," UCP said. Durov countersued in a US court, alleging UCP was trying to coerce and defraud him out of his ownership of Telegram. As part of a 2014 settlement, all parties agreed to drop their claims. But Durov got his prize: the reins of Telegram.

These days, there is no question of who is in control at Telegram. To work there is to join the cult of Pavel. The boss sports a custom-designed, all-black ensemble, inspired by Keanu Reeves's character in *The Matrix*. He enjoys a lifestyle of ascetic ritual: at least 200 push-ups and 100 sit-ups each morning. No alcohol, tobacco or coffee.

Where Silicon Valley rivals such as Meta and X have thousands of staffers, Durov has around 60 full-time underlings. The identities of his staff are shrouded in secrecy. On its own LinkedIn page, the company states: "Telegram has a No LinkedIn policy. Accounts claiming to be past or present employees never worked at Telegram." But, according to people familiar with the matter, many are young, brilliant software engineers plucked from relative obscurity by Durov and his brother from coding championships. These hires are paid lavishly. They spend summers working away from Dubai to escape the heat, once at a castle in Umbria.

"There is practically zero churn. They share the same values and believe in the mission of the company," Durov told the FT, in the 2024 interview several months before his detainment in France. He claimed to be "deeply" involved in all Telegram's processes. "It's more like a religion than a company to him," said one Dubai associate. When Durov missed the twice-weekly company meeting during his detention, it was one of only two times he had ever done so in 12 years, according to people familiar with the matter.

Dated mid-2025, previously unreported documents revealing Telegram's leadership team support the claim that Durov's top lieutenants have stuck around. Igor Diakonov, chief infrastructure officer and head of infrastructure management, joined in 2013. So did Mike Ravdonikas, who, as chief operations officer, runs Telegram's external comms, regulatory affairs and moderation, as well as maintaining a website showcasing his own poetry. Durov's three top engineering leaders also joined in 2013, all from VK. No executive has left since 2014, according to one person familiar with the matter.

While Durov is the public face of Telegram, the intellectual power is his brother Nikolai. Those who know the chief scientist describe him as a mathematical savant: shy, dishevelled, often lost in his thoughts. As a student, he won prestigious maths competitions, before twice winning the International Collegiate Programming Contest, the Olympic Games of programming. (Neither French prosecutors nor Telegram would comment on a Politico report that there is a warrant out for Nikolai.)

"They are like two hemispheres of one brain," said Kononov. "Nikolai is about tech inventions, and Pavel is about translating these into products, marketing and fulfilling his political dreams." Neff agreed: "When you have someone like [Nikolai] in your back pocket, you can basically do anything in the tech world. Pavel generates the demand and the spotlight."

▣

WITH NIKOLAI AT HIS SIDE, DUROV HAS MADE a roaring success out of Telegram. Surpassing one billion monthly users in March 2025, the platform has become a key communications channel for officials and the military, particularly in Russia, Ukraine and other eastern European countries, and a democratic lifeline during moments of civil unrest, from Hong Kong to Iran and Belarus.

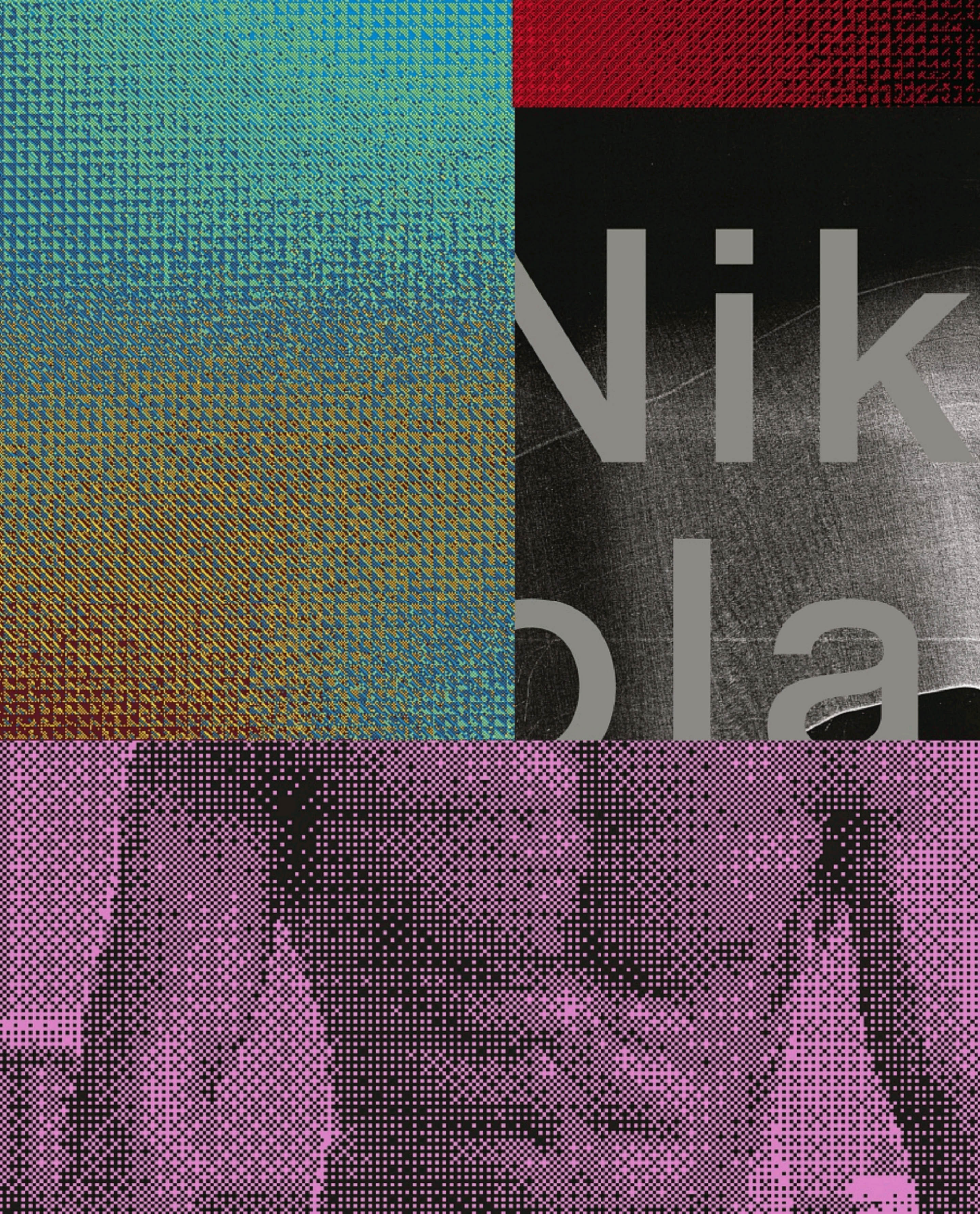
Insiders say the app's superpower has been rolling out product updates at breakneck speed, expanding beyond private messaging into a one-stop shop with public groups, broadcast channels, gaming, shopping and payments services. "What Durov is good at is lateral arbitrage – taking something that works in one market and launching it into a new market and improving on that," said Neff.

In 2021, cyber-security experts argued that despite Telegram's promises of absolute privacy in its private messages (not even the company is supposed to be able to access them), its end-to-end encryption displayed cryptographic weaknesses. As the app broadened its services to include group-chat capabilities and broadcast channels, critics noted that users might mistakenly assume these features were also end-to-end encrypted by default, and that Telegram had failed to correct the record.

Last week, a Russian minister claimed that foreign intelligence services were able to see Telegram messages sent by Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. "Telegram's not a private messenger," Signal founder Moxie Marlinspike said on a podcast in February. "It's the opposite."

Telegram told the FT that its employees "cannot access" any user messages. Even those that are not fully end-to-end encrypted and instead stored in the cloud are protected because its decryption keys are split into parts and never kept in the same place as the data they protect, it has said. "No breaches of Telegram's encryption have ever been found," it said. "The Russian government's allegation that our encryption has been compromised is a deliberate fabrication intended to justify outlawing Telegram and forcing citizens on to a state-controlled messaging platform engineered for mass surveillance and censorship."

In 2018, Nikolai Durov developed Gram, Telegram's own cryptocurrency and underlying blockchain, while Pavel raised $1.7bn in private sales of rights to Gram ahead of its launch. But the following year, the US Securities and Exchange Commission sued Telegram and blocked it from distributing the tokens, alleging Gram was an unregistered security. Telegram settled the case, paying an $18.5mn fine and agreeing to return $1.2bn to investors, including Silicon Valley venture capital firms such as Benchmark and Kleiner Perkins.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'I SEEM TO BE HELD TO HIGHER STANDARDS THAN MOST OTHER PLATFORMS'

Gram's underlying code was revived by the open-source community, with a cryptocurrency called Ton emerging as the most popular token. Durov still has close affiliations with the Ton community. Andrew Rogozov, a former VK executive and a Durov associate, was a founding member of The Ton Foundation, an open-source group driving Toncoin's development. He now runs The Open Platform, a start-up that builds Toncoin tools for Telegram. Meanwhile, Durov has publicly championed the coin and integrated numerous Ton features into Telegram. Developers are encouraged to build games and experiences into the app that use the currency; advertising on Telegram is paid for using Toncoin; a Toncoin wallet has been built into the app for peer-to-peer and ecommerce payments; creators are able to sell and earn in the currency.

In 2025, Toncoin began to gain mainstream popularity. In March, VC firms invested more than $400mn in the currency, according to Durov, who cited top investor groups Sequoia Capital, Benchmark, Ribbit, Draper and Vy. Shaun Maguire, a Sequoia partner known for his pro-Trump stance, said in a statement that the open-source team working on Ton was "best in the world at the intersection of consumer product thinking and crypto infrastructure". He added: "When you combine this with the global distribution of Telegram, we're very excited to see where they go." The coin has now been listed on major cryptocurrency exchanges such as Kraken, Gemini and Coinbase, as Durov makes inroads in Silicon Valley.

The Toncoin ecosystem has propped up what would otherwise be modest revenues and growth for Telegram, according to financial filings obtained by the FT. In theory, as demand for the crypto rises due to its integration on the platform, so does the price of Toncoin, which Telegram holds in plentiful supply. In the first half of 2025, nearly one-third of Telegram's revenue, or $300mn, came from Toncoin-related deals, according to documents and people familiar with the matter. Premium subscription nearly doubled to $223mn sales in the first half of 2025, as the company added news features for power users, while advertising revenue ticked up only 5 per cent to $125mn over the period.

On a call with bondholders late last year, a transcript of which was seen by the FT, Telegram's chief investment officer John Hyman said "the bulk" of crypto revenues were through a long-term contract with the Ton Foundation that would continue until 2029. "We see huge potential for Ton, for the position we still have in Ton," said Hyman, a former Morgan Stanley banker who single-handedly oversees Telegram's debt financing.

Yet the cryptomarket is notoriously volatile, and Toncoin's price has been weighed down by wider market bearishness. Despite an operating profit of nearly $400mn in the first half of 2025, Telegram's net losses were $222mn, compared with a $334mn net profit in the same period of 2024. One person familiar with the matter said this was because the company had to write down the value of its holdings of Toncoin, the price of which is down by about 80 per cent since its peak at $7.88 in July 2024.

"There's very little organic demand [for Toncoin] outside of Telegram's own internal mechanisms," said Elies Campo, who helped work on Telegram's growth, partnerships and business development between 2015 and 2020. "The circularity is the core problem... If either side weakens, the other follows."

Last summer, Nasdaq-listed Verb Technologies, a marketing video software group, agreed to a $558mn investment from a vehicle run by Manuel Stotz, then president of the Ton Foundation. In return, Verb switched to become a digital assets treasury company holding Toncoin. Verb, since renamed Ton Strategy Co, has invested more than $700mn in the cryptocurrency. Announcing the deal, Stotz, who is now Ton Strategy's executive chairman, described Durov as the "GOAT ("Greatest of All Time") – in the domain of social media & product", and posted a topless photo of the founder: "His proof-of-work [is], well, quite visible 😁"

Telegram told the FT that its "long-term business model is not dependent on cryptocurrencies", adding that its "main focus" is selling premium subscriptions, as well as advertising. The company called Campo's analysis: "uneducated, unreliable and just plain wrong".

Some bondholders remain bullish about Telegram's business prospects. One told the FT that the platform had opportunities for swift revenue growth given it was highly undermonetised. Another added, "What makes these guys different is they are better in connecting the whole ecosystem to the messaging platform, and they seem more capable than other platforms in finding ways to monetise the ecosystem."

Campo was not convinced: "Strip out the Ton sales and crypto deals and you have roughly $350mn in real product revenue" in the first half of 2025, he said. "It's a house of cards... Pavel has navigated impossible situations before. The margin for error is just extremely thin."

IT WAS MID-MAY 2025, AT THE CANNES FILM Festival, and Durov was attending a charity auction in the resplendent Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc with his girlfriend, the glamorous crypto influencer and aspiring actress Yulia Vavilova. As the auctioneer reeled off the lots, Durov casually bid $400,000 to buy her a role in an upcoming Spike Lee movie. The auctioneer slammed down a gavel and the ballroom erupted into cheers of delight. Durov did not so much as flinch.

It was more than an extravagant romantic gesture. The theatrics served as a reminder to anyone watching – French authorities included – that nine months after his detainment Durov would not be cowed. Since the previous summer, he had been living in luxury lockdown in one of Paris's palace hotels. Vavilova had posted pictures of five-star spas and horse riding near the palace of Versailles. That year "felt like a survival race straight out of *Squid Game*," she wrote on Telegram, "while other moments were more like an enchanting *Emily in Paris* story." The travel ban was relaxed in July 2025.

A Telegram bondholder put it differently. "He's so rich that he feels he owns the world. In some ways, it's true... Poor Pavel, he's forced to live in some Parisian palace. I'm sure he's enjoying it and living like Putin does in Russia."

Durov has appeared "increasingly paranoid" since his detainment and "seems to mostly be talking to a very narrow circle of people", said Aleksandra Urman, a researcher at the University of Zurich who has studied extremism on Telegram. She noted he had also strategically embraced American libertarians, granting video interviews to conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, and meeting in Paris with podcaster Lex Fridman. "He's trying to pivot to a certain part of his western audience. In the west, he knows his main user groups have been extreme-right or right-wing groups. It lands well." Telegram disputed this characterisation, adding that its users "don't belong to a certain political party, what unites them is a belief in free speech".

Durov is also close to Xavier Niel, the maverick French tech and telecoms billionaire who was among the first people Durov called after his detainment, according to people familiar with the matter. Niel has taken regular walks with Durov around Paris and advised him on how to navigate the French legal system. Niel, who spent a short stint in prison early in his career related to his early investments in sex shops in France,

Paper planes in support of Durov in Moscow, August 2024

'HE'S SO RICH THAT HE FEELS HE OWNS THE WORLD. IN SOME WAYS, IT'S TRUE... POOR PAVEL'

told the FT in November 2024: "When I went to prison, everyone disappeared on me. So when a friend runs into a problem in France, I'm not the kind of person who doesn't pick up the phone."

Durov has also courted Elon Musk, who associates say he long admired. In December 2024, Durov met Musk for lunch when the X boss was visiting Paris for the reopening of the Notre-Dame cathedral. Shortly after a second meeting in May, Durov announced a one-year deal with xAI to integrate the start-up's controversial Grok chatbot into Telegram. Telegram was to receive $300mn from xAI, as well as half the revenue from xAI subscriptions sold via the messaging app, he wrote on X.

That partnership has not materialised. Instead, Telegram recently launched Cocoon, a "decentralised AI network" designed by Nikolai and others, whereby individual owners of the expensive GPU chips that power AI models rent them out to developers in return for Toncoin.

There have also been PR crises. In July 2024, a woman named Irina Bolgar told Forbes Russia that Durov was father to her three children, providing proof of his paternity. Days later, Durov posted on social media about his widespread sperm donation projects, saying it was possible he had "over 100 biological kids" and he planned to "open source" his DNA so that his children could find one another. In August that year, it emerged that Bolgar had filed a criminal lawsuit against Durov in a Swiss court in 2023 alleging he had been violent towards one of their children and had stopped supporting the family financially, according to court documents. Telegram rejected the allegations: "These events, which never occurred, were only 'remembered' by Ms Bolgar... as she was preparing to initiate legal proceedings for personal financial gain. The suspicious timing raises doubts about the credibility of these accusations."

One of Durov's preoccupations, as he has gone after western investment and audiences, has been distancing himself from his native country. In the past, Durov has refused to take sides on the Russia-Ukraine war or comment on Vladimir Putin: "Let's not go there," he told the FT in 2024. But he continues to deny any ties to Moscow. "A sad spectacle of a state afraid of its own people," he said on Tuesday after the news of the Russian criminal investigation broke.

In the wake of the French investigation, conjecture about these ties has grown in the west. Upon his detainment in Paris, Moscow raced to offer Durov assistance, demanding consular access to him and suggesting the case was politically motivated. Independent Russian news website iStories reported it had obtained records of Durov having travelled in and out of Russia more than 50 times between 2014 and 2021.

Other critics noted that immediately before his detainment, Durov had been travelling around Central Asia with Vavilova, staying at the Four Seasons in Baku, Azerbaijan, where they drove racing cars, took helicopter rides and sharpened their marksmanship at shooting ranges. The trip appears to have overlapped with Putin's state visit to Baku on August 18 and 19. The Kremlin has publicly denied there was any meeting between the pair.

Even so, said one European official, if Durov had "problems with Russia... I struggle with the messaging. Durov was in Baku, that's practically Putin's backyard". Telegram said that Durov made infrequent trips to St Petersburg to visit family, which he posted about publicly on his Instagram account, noting he has not returned since the start of the war in Ukraine. The company rejected the idea of any meeting between Durov and Putin in Baku. It said: "Mr Durov was in a city of 2.4 million people outside of Russia, not at a backyard barbecue across from the Kremlin."

◆

EVALUATIONS DIFFER ON THE STRENGTH OF the investigation against Durov. His allies believe the case against him is weak, the result of a net cast as wide as possible by French prosecutors who, they claim, lack expertise in digital platforms. "I have never seen so many accusations with so little legal precision," one of Durov's lawyers, Christophe Ingrain, told French magazine Le Point.

The prosecutors leading the investigation say they acted after receiving complaints about Telegram's lack of responsiveness to requests from law enforcement in France and other European countries. Johanna Brousse, the magistrate who leads the cyber crimes division at the Paris prosecutor's office, is a particularly formidable opponent. Her peers describe her as a determined campaigner unafraid to push boundaries to prosecute across borders and at the cutting edge of technology. "She's like Joan of Arc... she's impassioned about her work with a strong sense of the collective," one said.

Durov's patience with the French justice system seems to have worn thin. Last year, he accused top French intelligence officials of pressuring him to censor certain conservative Moldovan and Romanian accounts on Telegram ahead of fraught elections in each country. "I refused. We didn't block protesters in Russia, Belarus, or Iran. We won't start doing it in Europe," he wrote on X.

In a rare public statement France's intelligence agency DGSE said it "strongly refutes allegations that requests to ban accounts linked to any electoral process were made". Instead, it had "been obliged, on several occasions" to contact Durov "to remind him firmly of his company's responsibilities, and his own personal responsibilities, in terms of preventing terrorist and child pornography threats".

In the coming weeks, Telegram is due to repay the principal on some of its bonds. Whether investors will be as forthcoming in the future as they have been in the past remains to be seen. For its part, Telegram insists on its independence in the near term. "Following next month's bond payment, we will remain highly liquid, with cash on hand that materially exceeds our outstanding bond obligations," it said. "Our balance sheet is strong, we are generating substantial cash flow, and we have neither the need nor the intention to seek external financing."

One person familiar with Durov's thinking claims the drawn out investigation has begun to weigh on him. "He feels all this is very unfair and misguided," they said. Publicly, though, Durov has remained steadfast. "Up until this day we don't understand what we did wrong... the investigation is ongoing and it's been frustratingly slow," he said, via video link to the Oslo Freedom Forum in May 2025. His appearance was introduced by a projected image of Durov dressed as a Greek deity, oiled chest barely covered by a white toga, with a goat slung over his shoulder.

Asked by the interviewer if he considered himself a hostage in France, or if French intelligence were trying to pressure him to "do what they want", Durov was solemn. "I seem to be held to higher standards than most other platforms," he replied. "I would rather die than become anyone's asset".

Additional reporting by Leila Abboud in Paris, Antoine Gara in New York and Rob Smith, Philip Stafford and Ivan Levingston in London

REUTERS/YULIA MOROZOVA

CHISWICK
AUCTIONS

The Fine Sale

Monday 9 March
11:00

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Tuesday 17 March
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Wednesday
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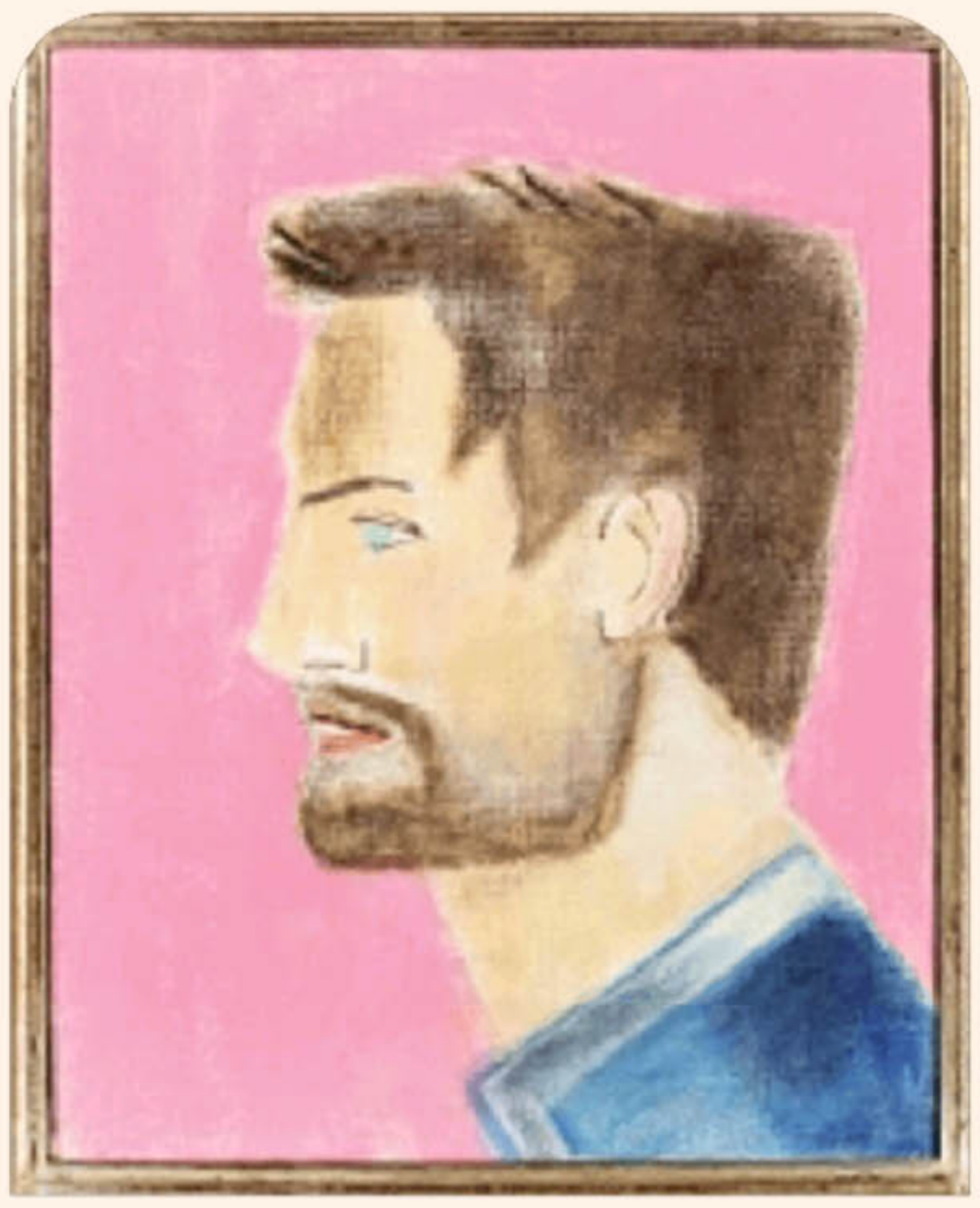
Champagne Deutz & Quinta do Noval

Thursday 26 March
11:00



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HOUSE OF MERCY

MEDITATIONS DURING A YEAR OF CANCER TREATMENT AT LONDON'S OLDEST HOSPITAL

BY ROSIE DASTGIR
ILLUSTRATION BY ŪLA ŠVEIKAUSKAITĖ

IT IS EARLY SEPTEMBER 2024

when I first walk through the Henry VIII gatehouse of St Bartholomew's Hospital, the oldest hospital in Britain still working on its original site. Founded in 1123 as part of the Priory of St Bartholomew, it is situated at the entangled junctures of ancient and modern London, skirted by the Barbican to the east, Smithfield meat market to the north, the Old Bailey to the south. The church of St Bartholomew the Less inside the grounds is the only remaining medieval structure, and the main hospital was rebuilt around a piazza courtyard in the 18th century.

I pass construction work and scaffolding and elegant hoardings declaring an ambitious scope of works that are hidden from view. The 18th-century North Wing section, housing the Great Hall and Stair painted by William Hogarth, who was born nearby on Bartholomew Close, is undergoing a huge restoration project. A reproduction self-portrait of the artist and his pug hangs jauntily upon a section of building site.

I barely register it, barely look. For now, my gaze is fixed upon the bright modern atrium building where I am about to be told if I have made the cut for an experimental new vaccine trial to treat kidney cancer. Like a character in a Russian folk tale, I have had to undergo a series of exacting tests before Baba Yaga will grant me access to the fabled 27th kingdom, and one of these is a brain scan. There will be 272 people enlisted on the trial around the world, and there is a chance I might be one.

This is how it begins. One night in February, a dangerously high blood-pressure reading causes my husband to Google the Mayo Clinic, which suggests a medical emergency. I'd been monitoring it since January after a GP's nurse flagged it up during a routine check. "I'll take you to hospital," he says, and I resist. It is late, and I am already cocooned in pyjamas, my finger in the page of a novel I am about to sink into. "I really think you should go," he says. "I'll drive you, don't worry. Better to be safe."

Then the late-night drive to hospital, the incidental find of a mass, silent and unobtrusive. An *incidentaloma*, a neologism that describes a tumour found by chance during a diagnostic imaging test performed for another (unrelated) medical reason.

In the weeks that follow, my husband is the search engine, researching and sifting and organising; it is he who presses for a second opinion, who finds a surgeon. He crunches medical data on immunotherapy and statistical outcomes and returns it to me in bite-sized portions that I nibble and metabolise.

My tumour is 5cm in diameter, and it is designated Stage 1B, which means it has been detected at an early stage. A stroke of luck. During robotic laparoscopic surgery, the surgeon removes a margin of several millimetres around its perimeter and checks it is clear while still in theatre. I wake up to the news that I still possess two kidneys, which feels like a gain until the revelation that there are microscopic indications of invasion into the fatty layer beside the kidney.

This translates into the cold hard statistic that the chances of recurrence are high, and I leap from Stage 1 to Stage 3 and into a new threshold of inchoate fear. "But overall, it is positive news," the surgeon reassures me, because the tumour itself has been successfully removed with no evidence of spread to other organs. His work is impeccable, leaving scant visible trace; a series of punctuation marks, five dots and a bracket on my abdomen. We shake hands and say goodbye, and he wishes me the best of luck before I walk back down the sun-drenched corridor.

AT AIRPORTS, THERE IS THE STRANGE FRISson of being made to stand with two feet spread apart on decal footprints, and two hands raised in surrender to the millimetre-wave body scanner. Yet after all these years of surveillance, the steel screw in my left metatarsal, an innocent old fix for an awkward fracture, has never been caught on screen by the security staff, never set off an incriminatory beep. Nor does it get any mention by Professor Thomas Powles, the puckish consultant leading the mRNA vaccine trial at St Bartholomew's Hospital. "Your CT scans are all normal," he says. "But there was something unusual about your brain scan." He spins around from his computer to face me.

I sit on the edge of the Vitra chair in his office of the bright atrium building, and brace for shock. I see the empty Coke Zero can and the Twix packet on his desk, signs of a carefree approach to snacking, and decide that he is not about to deliver bad news. In fact, he gives Willy Wonka energy in the moment, mischievous and excited: he's going to give me the golden ticket, I know he is!

"Did you know you had a stroke," he asks curiously, "a minor infarction, a very long time ago? The white squiggle, right here." Like a silent erasure, an infarction occurs when the blood supply is blocked, leaving behind a small area of necrotised tissue. "I did not know," I say, though I do recall straightaway, exactly when it happened. To the year, the date, the moment.

The infarction is like a wormhole, spinning me back three decades to a cold dark January night on a road in Scotland. My father was moving house, moving north from Huddersfield to Edinburgh. In a harried, middle-of-the night kind of way, I had driven up that evening to help. He was in his late fifties, divorced and living precariously on income support. The van I was driving skidded on black ice and sent me flying through snowflakes on to frosted tarmac, a muddle of shattered toes and legs, a knee, a foot. Scattered around me were all his worldly possessions, his gas stove and his suitcases of clothing, his chests of drawers and boxes of books.

Ten days later, as I lay on a geriatric ward in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, a nurse gave me an injection that seemed to trigger another ill-fated journey. An air bubble in the syringe entered my bloodstream and raced up to my brain to produce an embolism that briefly paralysed the left half of my body. And while the right-hand side of my mouth screamed for help, the left-hand side enacted a vivid struggle against it, tugging me across the threshold into Lethe, the dark river of oblivion. The infarction evanesced in minutes, or seconds, or nanoseconds and, like a miracle, I was back with the living, back to 1989 on the noisy geriatric ward in the dying days of Tory rule and the osteoporotic NHS, and a nurse in a panicky voice insisting, "Oh you're fine, you're all right, hen. You're not dying!"

But I nearly had. And in another century, in an ancient hospital that is now shiny and new, the experience is finally named and categorised. Here is visual evidence, a white blotch on the scan. The scan is a threshold into another form of seeing, a palimpsest of time and place, and I sift back through the fragments of what happened all those years ago.

Something else was lost in the jumble of possessions spilled on the roadside. Something that I urgently needed to retrieve that night: a portfolio of work, my application for graduate school, that had to be posted to New York University the following day. In the final minutes before I went into surgery, I begged my father to find it and make sure it was sent.

Do not go to Google in the event of a diagnosis is the usual advice. But why not? I feel the need to seek out images of the kidney, an organ to which I have paid scant attention until this moment.

In the blank days between surgery and treatment, I hunt down ancient images of kidneys online. How did people visualise their organs, their pathologies, in the centuries before scanning made our innards so patently readable? I find a 16th-century Chinese woodcut engraving of Shenzang in an archive of medical ephemera, and learn that Shen means kidney, and the kidney is a Zang organ, one of the five Zang viscera. There are two of them, resembling stones, located adjacent to the 14th vertebra in the back, below the stomach, on both sides. "The left kidney, or kidney (*shen*) proper, partakes of the nature of water, while the right kidney, the *mingmen* (Portal of Life) partakes of the nature of fire. The *mingmen* is crucial to life; it is the place where innate Qi is stored, the origin of life processes, the very root of existence."

Then I search for "infarction" and am rewarded with an image from the distant past, a 17th-century engraving of a crooked Chinese man after suffering a *zhongfeng* (wind stroke), a phrase which holds both violence and lyricism, another way of seeing a white squiggle.

"Is there just one person that we are meant to meet in the world," my daughter muses one day in the kitchen in London. "The perfect match, the love of your life?" A dreamy question she floats now and again, and I wonder if there is a cache of data somewhere that would furnish a satisfying answer once and for all.

"I don't know," I say. "I don't think so." But here is the thing. If the portfolio had not made it over the Atlantic, if it had been lost and my place at graduate school forfeited, I would never have met my husband; we would not have found each other. Then the incidentaloma might not have been found either, the infarction might still be hidden, the vaccine trial another path in the gameplay not chosen.

I AM BAD AT READING INSTRUCTION MANUALS, AND I NEVER bother with the enclosed slip of side effects in small print found in a packet of pills. The vaccine trial consent file lands in my email inbox with a nagging alert: Read Me! which makes me think of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. The thick document has been sent in advance of my first meeting with the clinical trial team, but I cannot bring myself to open it.

The next day, I shuttle back to the clinic on my bicycle, and meet the senior clinical research practitioner, a woman in her thirties named V. She has long dark hair and calm brown eyes, and her manner is gentle, focused. She hands me a clipboard holding the consent form that has been languishing in my downloads. Everyone is excited about the prospect of my joining the trial; everyone, it seems, except me. V ushers me in the direction of the scales and the blood pressure monitor before I manage: "I need to think about this, I'm not quite sure I'm ready to sign yet!" Time is passing, time is of the essence, the window is closing. I sign.

A tissue sample from my kidney tumour and blood samples will be sent to Switzerland to be tested, before being dispatched to a Merck lab in New Jersey, where an individualised vaccine will be designed and made. The cancer vaccine was developed by Moderna, the biotech company specialising in mRNA research, which created one of the first Covid-19 vaccines.

The trial is a Phase 2, randomised, double-blind clinical study of (mRNA 4157), as yet unnamed, and it will last eight years. A combination of immunotherapy using checkpoint inhibitors, magical molecules that stop cancer cells from hiding within the body, in tandem with the vaccine to further boost the immune system response.

You, your trial doctor, and the trial staff won't know what treatment you are getting, says the consent form. You can choose to withdraw from the trial at any time without giving a reason.

Half of us will be given a placebo, and I may never find out whether I have actually received my individualised vaccine or just a vial of plain saline. After nine jabs administered every three weeks, I will undergo regular surveillance: blood tests and full-body scans, for months and years to come. During treatment, I will visit the trial site about 14 times for blood tests, scans and infusions. I will be given a card that identifies me as a trial participant, to be carried at all times, in case of emergency.

MY ROLL-CALL OF SIDE EFFECTS IS MODERATE: ITCHY SKIN, CONGESTION, GARGANTUAN SNEEZES THAT TERRIFY THE CAT

One day in early October, I walk past the church of St Bartholomew the Great where Hogarth was baptised, past the restoration team in their hard hats and high-vis jackets, past the scaffolding and dusty hoardings, the memorial benches and the pigeons, and into the atrium building for my very first immunotherapy infusion on the seventh floor. My treatment chair has an enviable view of St Paul's Cathedral, and peeping out through the rooftops is Lady Justice on the dome of the Old Bailey, balancing the sword of authority in her right hand, the scales of justice in her left.

"Right or left arm?" the nurse asks, and I tell her I don't mind. She admires my fulsome veins as she tightens the tourniquet on my left upper arm, and inserts the needle. A bag of clear liquid, the infusion, is hung upon a stand connected to an electronic monitor, which is fed into my body via the drip in my arm. All around me there are people receiving their own individualised cocktails of high-tech infusions, and a sleepy atmosphere of placid acceptance prevails.

In the weeks that follow, I meet the professor for my consultation, who seems genuinely gripped by his own question: "What have you got for me?" Luckily, I don't have much. My roll-call of side effects is moderate: itchy skin, nasal congestion, gargantuan sneezes that terrify the cat. "Beautiful," he says, and means it. "We're very happy with how things are going." And when I prompt him about when the actual vaccine treatment will start, he whirls off down the corridor to find the answer. "They're saying December," he says, crestfallen. "Bit of a wait, I'm afraid."

I adjust myself to another shift on the horizon of uncertainty. The wait won't kill me. In truth, it is barely a wrinkle in time, and I cannot help thinking my timing has been good. If my diagnosis had happened five years ago, or 10, or 400, none of this would be even possible. I have become grateful for alerts and schedules, and for the incidentaloma that has landed me in this place, right here, right now. "You'll be well taken care of by the trial team," the professor says reassuringly. "It's Merck running the show, and they keep us all on track here."

NOVEMBER COMES, AND WITH IT, THE RE-election of Donald Trump. This time, the win is decisive, passing the critical threshold of 270 electoral college votes. "The autumn winds blow chilly and cold", sing Simon and Garfunkel through my earphones as I wait my turn for the phlebotomist. The sentiment has never seemed truer than now. In the countdown to Christmas, the nights grow longer and days are compressed ever more tightly into brief lozenges of cold grey light. At the end of my street, the Caribbean family who are always first with their Christmas tree somehow beat their own record and put it up before Advent, a personal best of blue fairy lights against the gathering gloom.

On the 17th day of Advent, a celestial figure appears in the calendar window when I open it, heralding the day of my first vaccination. In St Bartholomew's Hospital, the North Wing restorations remain hidden behind scaffolding, and somewhere inside the King George V Building, a patient is haltingly playing John Lennon's "Imagine" on the piano. Flyers for carol services have appeared inside the lift, and patients and relatives arrive bearing gifts. Thank-you cards are slid shyly beneath the Perspex shield at reception to Marvin, who is never not fielding questions from waiting patients.

Today the wait feels longer than ever, like waiting for Christmas when you are a child. And then a treatment chair becomes free, and my clinical trial nurse appears from nowhere, toting a sunshine yellow insulated bag stamped with black lettering that holds the vaccine, or possibly the placebo. I am not afraid as the nurse approaches my left arm with the needle and injects.

The morning after, I lie in bed and tune into any signals from my body, hoping for somatic confirmation that I have won the golden ticket. I hope for vertigo and nausea, for shivering and aches – my symptoms after the first Covid-19 vaccine shot – but nothing is broadcast, nothing to see here.

I TUNE INTO SIGNALS FROM MY BODY, HOPING THAT I HAVE WON THE GOLDEN TICKET

After his inauguration in January 2025, President Trump appoints the long-standing anti-vaxxer Robert F Kennedy Jr to be the new US health secretary. The news is like a blast of arctic wind for anyone who is sick, or who will fall sick, in other words everyone, everybody with any filament of connection to the US. Trump sneezes and the world catches a cold, or cancer, from which it may not recover.

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote, "totalitarianism replaces all first-rate talent with crackpots and fools, whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty." When we look back on this era, will we marvel at how quickly institutions were dismantled and degraded, how rapidly it came to pass, when we were not concentrating, too absorbed, too distracted, and just not paying attention?

My final treatment is at the end of August. Another thing happens that month too. The US Department of Health and Human Services announces it plans to cancel $500mn in funding for mRNA vaccines. The war on science is ramping up. The dismantling and the degrading is happening in plain sight. With slow queasy logic, I begin to perceive that the pandemic was the best of times and the worst of times for vaccine development. A successful vaccine was rapidly made and mass-produced. The success fuelled conspiracy theories about mRNA vaccines that proliferated with viral speed. Mutating stories about how your DNA is spookily changed by a Covid-19 shot. About how many millions died because of the vaccine. About how Covid-19 vaccines will implant microchips into humans and track them forever more. How they are linked to cases of turbo cancers in the British royal family.

For the first time since being on the trial, I am anxious. "Does this mean it will impact the vaccine trial I am on?" I ask V, the next time I go into clinic. "Given what's happening in the US, the backlash against medical science?" She darts between the BP machine and the little storage room where urine samples are collected, a jumble of plastic pots in sealed bags. I stand on the scales to record that my weight has not changed. "Oh no, no, it won't," V says, "We don't need to worry."

But we do, don't we? Surely we do.

I think about the multitude of clinicians toiling away in labs out of sight, pushing life-changing boundaries against a tide of stupidity, sifting through scans to make sense of it all. Trying and failing and trying again will take years and years, and at the end of it, will I turn out to be one of the survivors? I choose not to ask ChatGPT this question. Instead, I put my (blind) faith in the clinical team, who will be vigilant, alert. I will subject myself to attentive seeing of the highest order.

IN EARLY OCTOBER, I AM BACK IN THE PARISH of St Bartholomew's for surveillance. It just so happens that my appointment coincides with the unveiling of the Great Hall and the Hogarth Stair in the north wing of St Bart's, the day of its reopening to the public. I cross the courtyard towards the restored building, which is no longer shrouded from view. The dark green heritage-compliant paint on the front door is slightly tacky to the touch, and I step gingerly over the threshold. Sweeping up the grand staircase are William Hogarth's two vast oil canvases, "The Pool of Bethesda" (1736) and "The Good Samaritan" (1737), both still hanging in their original locations. Each canvas is magnificent, but it is the scene depicted in "The Pool of Bethesda" that captures and stills me.

The figure of Christ is at the centre, his miraculous healing powers concentrated upon a lame man, his head bandaged, reclining close to the pool. I read that the actual Pool of Bethesda is an archaeological site in Jerusalem, comprising two *mikvas*, ancient ritual bathing pools, for healing and ablutions; the etymology of the Hebrew or Aramaic name means "house of mercy" or "grace". Legend has it that the moment the watery ripples of the pool began, the first person to plunge in would be instantly cured, whatever their ailment.

The painting throngs with the afflicted poor, pressing around Christ and the transformative pool, in desperate hope of a miracle. The artist appears to have deliberately staged their bodies as visibly sick, to be seen and cured; here is a pearl-clad gentlewoman with an inflamed breast, possibly denoting mastitis or cancer, and there, among the lame and the jaundiced, is a stunted figure with what might be hyperthyroidism. For centuries, visual signs of illness were the only markers for disease and its diagnosis. In Hogarth's time, the sick filed through the gatehouse and were observed for signs and portents of maladies before being admitted into the healing space of the hospital. Little by way of medical treatment was available, but the courtyard and surrounding buildings offered a place of protection, of succour and respite, as forms of care.

In 1791, nearly 30 years after Hogarth's death, an anatomical theatre was established in the hospital, advancing pathological research and allowing physicians to see a plethora of diseases that lurked unseen.

This 21st-century hospital is a trial site for an experimental cancer vaccine, and it is also, has always been, will always be, a medieval site of healing and celestial auguries, of miracle cures performed and witnessed. It is a nexus of contradiction and resistance, of the ancient and modern entwined. Plucked from the streets of London, Hogarth's characters represent the legions of patients who still stream through the gatehouse, each one of them, like me, in search of a cure.

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INSIDE A restaurant review from Ukraine **P37**

Appetites

Wine

Is 2016 Bordeaux ageing beautifully?

by JANCIS ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION by DEBORA SZPILMAN

There are no great wines, only great bottles. This maxim, highlighting how much individual bottles of the same wine can vary, was brought home forcibly to us 21 tasters at this year's 10 Years On blind tasting of 168 wines from the highly praised 2016 Bordeaux vintage. It is regarded, along with 2019 and 2022, as one of the best since 2010.

Ch Ormes de Pez, a lowly St-Estèphe costing less than £35 a bottle, held its own gloriously when tasted blind alongside wines costing more than five times the price, trumping heavyweights Chx Montrose and Cos d'Estournel to be crowned the group's favourite wine from the appellation. For what it's worth (not much if, like me, you see scores as a necessary evil) I gave the 2016 18.5 points out of 20 in 2026, whereas in 2017, 2018 and 2020 I had given it 16.5, 16 and 17, respectively.)

But, of course, tasting that many wines blind over one and a half days is a very different exercise from tasting wines when you know what they are. The blind tasting had taken place, like the examination of the 2022 vintage on which

JANCIS RECOMMENDS

BETTER-PRICED 2016s

Most of these wines are relatively easy to find by the case in bond. Single-bottle prices below are all duty paid.

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- **Quinault l'Enclos 2016 St-Émilion (13.5%)**
  £29.98 NICKOLLS & PERKS, FROM £105 FOR SIX IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Ormes de Pez 2016 St-Estèphe (13.5%)**
  £31.30 CHRISTOPHER PIPER, FROM £110 FOR SIX IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Tronquoy Lalande 2016 St-Estèphe (14.5%)**
  £36 FOUR WALLS, FROM £359 FOR 12 IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Cruzelles 2016 Lalande de Pomerol (13.5%)**
  £37.20 FOUR WALLS, £130 FOR SIX IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Clos La Madeleine 2016 St-Émilion (14%)**
  £145 FOR SIX IN BOND FARR VINTNERS
- **Ch Calon Ségur, Marquis de Calon 2016 St-Estèphe (14%)**
  £39 HUNTSWORTH WINE, FROM £155 FOR SIX IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Lynch Moussas 2016 Pauillac (13.5%)**
  £39.60 FOUR WALLS, FROM £165 FOR SIX IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Monbrison 2016 Margaux (13.5%)**
  FROM £215 FOR SIX IN BOND IDEAL WINE COMPANY
- **La Tour Carnet 2016 Haut-Médoc (14%)**
  £49.95 VINE & BINE, FROM £215 FOR 12 IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS
- **Batailley 2016 Pauillac (13%)**
  £58.95 UNCORKED, FROM £225 FOR SIX IN BOND VARIOUS RETAILERS

TASTING NOTES, SCORES AND SUGGESTED DRINKING DATES ON JANCISROBINSON.COM
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I reported two weeks ago, at the headquarters of Farr Vintners in London and was undertaken by wine professionals with a particular interest in Bordeaux. We had precisely 45 minutes to pour, taste and dissect the 12 wines in each flight and reel when their identities were revealed.

Three weeks earlier, one of Farr's rivals, Bordeaux Index, had held its own annual 10 Years On tasting of the 2016 vintage for customers and media. Unlike the Farr tasting, this one was not blind. Perhaps because smart bordeaux needs a bigger push nowadays than it did when consumers were keener on it, Bordeaux Index put on a grander showing than usual. Rather than holding it in its offices, it took over the Grade II-listed building overlooking Hyde Park that is the headquarters of the Royal Aeronautical Society. Bollinger was offered as a palate cleanser and many a Bordeaux wine producer was in attendance, before being whisked off to dinner by their hosts.

Unfortunately, the Bordeaux Index tasting took place on the same day as Charles Sydney Wines' Loire tasting, about which I also wrote recently. So I had to be selective about which of the 87 2016 bordeaux on offer I tasted. But because I knew what I was tasting, my impressions were presumably and unavoidably coloured by my previous experiences of the producer and/or wine.

Some conclusions were common to each showing. The 2016 vintage is weakest in St-Émilion, or rather among some St-Émilions. Wines from the most respected St-Émilion producers such as Angélus, Ausone, Canon, Cheval Blanc and Figeac still showed extremely well. And there were some bargains in the lower ranks, but too many producers in between still seemed to be in thrall to the over-extracted recipe they misguidedly thought would please the American wine critic Robert Parker, even though 2013 was the last vintage he reviewed en primeur. Pavie and Troplong Mondot, at 15.5 per cent, were particular sinners in this respect although both châteaux today produce much more refined, appetising wines.

One problem was that, after a tricky spring, summer brought such drought that grapes stopped ripening. So the harvest was particularly late and there was a general lack of lusciousness, which called for particularly sensitive winemaking. And some of the St-Émilions seemed more dangerously evolved than one would want in a 10-year-old red bordeaux.

Pomerols were generally more successful than the St-Émilions with Église Clinet, Lafleur and Vieux Château Certan showing even better than Le Pin and Petrus did in the blind tasting, although both of these last two superstars shone brightly chez Bordeaux Index (as one would expect of wines at about £3,000 a bottle).

> Ch Ormes de Pez, a lowly St-Estèphe costing less than £35 a bottle, held its own gloriously

FIRST SIP

HOW TO TASTE RED WINE BLIND

This is a massive subject and I have space only to skim the surface. First, the mechanics. You need a friendly accomplice who knows which wine is which and doesn't need to taste blind. They can either bring you glasses already poured, preferably numbered, perhaps with a marker pen on the base, or can swathe the bottles in silver foil, paper or other opaque bags – again clearly differentiating them with a number. (Cheats may seek clues from the bottleneck – glass colour, remainders of the foil and/or evidence of a screwcap.)

If the aim is to identify the wine (an impressive party trick), colour can be a huge help. When wines are held at an angle against something white, the rim is particularly telling. Young wines have more depth of colour and tend to purple rather than orange. Very generally, wines based on these common grapes are successively deeper-coloured: Grenache, Pinot Noir and Gamay, Syrah and Merlot, Cabernet. But, of course, there are myriad variations. The drier the vintage, the thicker the skins, so there's more colour and tannin, and therefore the wine if young will be quite chewy. With experience, the first sniff can be the most revealing. Something happens in your brain to connect that aroma with something in your memory. If that fails, it helps to keep a list of the most obvious possibilities and to match your impressions to what you know of each.

If, however, you are tasting blind to assess the quality, as we were at Farr, just analyse what you're sensing. Does it smell clean and attractive? Are the vital elements of acidity, sweetness, tannin and alcohol in balance? And key: how long does the wine last on the palate after swallowing or spitting it out? This last is a professional necessity.

The wines from the left bank were definitely more consistent with some real gems, and not a few bargains (see my recommendations). The freshness of Pessac-Léognan was welcome, in Smith Haut-Lafitte and Domaine de Chevalier in particular. Margaux was the least exciting of the four Médoc communes, with too many wines showing the same sort of over-extraction as the lesser St-Émilions, although Chx Margaux, Palmer, Rauzan Ségla and Brane-Cantenac (a star of our recent 2022 tasting) showed particularly well. So did Pavillon Rouge, the second wine of Ch Margaux, at the Bordeaux Index tasting, less so chez Farr.

ST-JULIEN IS ALWAYS A SAFE HAVEN for traditional British professional (and amateur?) tasters, being classically structured but a little more approachable than a stereotypical Pauillac. Moreover, there are the usual relative bargains from the Barton stable and that shared by Gloria and St-Pierre. And these 2016s were indeed delightfully consistent, even if relatively youthful still. More storage charges to be paid! Even Léoville Poyferré, which has so often been the most obviously opulent of the St-Juliens, looked very impressive but was still tightly wound at both tastings.

The Pauillacs were slightly less consistent than the St-Juliens, with acidity sometimes being a little too prominent in some of the less successful examples. The surprise hit of the St-Estèphes outlined above was mirrored to a certain extent here. One of the most successful Pauillacs was Ormes de Pez's stablemate Lynch Bages, although both Pichons (Lalande and especially Baron) were stunning. The standard of vine growing and winemaking evident in such wines nowadays calls into question the need to stump up for a first growth at well over three times the price. (The three Pauillac first growths average about £600 a bottle, while these other three Pauillacs are well under £200.)

2016 was not a classic Sauternes vintage but those producers who held on until late rains obliged with some concentrated noble rot and produced some really fine wine, contrasting markedly with wines from those who lost their nerve and picked earlier. (This was before too significant a proportion of grapes were diverted into dry wines as happens now.)

Alcohols were generally modest in 2016 reds, rarely more than 13.5 per cent. But one rather shocking statistic from the Farr tasting was that seven bottles were seriously affected by cork taint, a failure rate of more than 4 per cent.

So did 2016 live up to the hype? On the left bank definitely, and at the best addresses on the right bank. The finest should last into the 2050s, but the most succulent right bank wines are already giving pleasure. FT

Review

Musafir, Kyiv

by KRISTINA BERDYNSKYKH

ILLUSTRATION *by* DANIEL EGNEUS

It's freezing in Kyiv, 0C to be exact, but for the first time in ages I'm actually warm. That's all I can think about at first as I sink on to a bench topped with soft, brightly upholstered cushions at Musafir: how warm I am here and how bitter this winter has been in every sense.

The reality of living with little to no electricity or heating, a result of Russia shelling Ukraine's energy infrastructure, has become the main topic of conversation in Kyiv. "I have electricity for three hours a day, and it's 8C in my apartment – what about you?" People talk about this at work, in the street and when meeting in cafés and restaurants like Musafir, a Crimean Tatar restaurant in the centre of the city that has become as popular for its resilience as for its food and affordable prices. In March 2022, as Russian troops approached Kyiv, it was one of the few establishments in the city to remain open that month. Despite the dramatic events around us, it feels cozy and calm inside. Four years on, as blackouts are common, the restaurant is well stocked with generators.

The interior here is like that of a typical Crimean Tatar house: white walls are hung with ornamental woollen rugs and ceramic plates. It's still providing a bit of comfort and normality I realise, as I stare at the cheburek dish in front of me. The large, crescent-shaped, deep-fried pie is so hot, I find myself almost offended by the

FIND IT

MUSAFIR

3B Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street
Kyiv, Ukraine 01030
+380 (0)99 568 77 76
musafir.com.ua

Starters 117-280 hryvnia (£2-£4.75)
Mains 219-521 hryvnia (£3.70-£8.90)
Desserts 64-178 hryvnia (£1.10 to £3)

inconvenience of waiting for it to cool. I eat it with my hands in the traditional way, but I make a mess of it in my haste. Juice from the rich beef filling drips onto the plate, but, thankfully, the thin, crispy dough is sturdy enough to withstand my manhandling. The yantyk, a meat pie cooked in a dry frying pan without oil, I manage to eat more successfully.

Working my way through the menu, I'm struck by how surreal this mundane experience is. Yesterday, I was interviewing people at heating points – huge tents set up by rescue services on the street, where everyone can drink hot tea, warm up and charge their phones. Today, I'm trying to choose what to order next from Musafir's menu. Shall I try the imam bayildi – baked aubergine stuffed with tomatoes, garlic, bell peppers and onions – or the sarma, a mixture of fragrant rice and minced meat wrapped in grape leaves? This abundance of options is typical of establishments in Kyiv. Restaurateurs have adapted to difficult conditions and established the necessary logistics. The main problem is staffing. The restaurant business, like any other in Ukraine, is experiencing a staff shortage. Mobilisation into the Ukrainian army begins for men at 25 years of age, so restaurants try to hire people younger than that.

As I eat, part of me is wondering whether there will be another attack with ballistic missiles and drones tomorrow night. (In fact, the strike will come three nights later.) But my surroundings reassure me that life in Kyiv is nearly peaceful. The only thing to concern me is that the imam bayildi: the aubergine is unpleasantly soft, almost fluffy. We dive into the delicate hummus with grilled beef next, and it is pure joy.

Musafir, meaning "guest", was once located in Bakhchysarai, an ancient town in Crimea, but after Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula in 2014, the restaurant moved to Kyiv, as did many Crimean Tatars who did not want to remain under occupation. Their cuisine, which was new to Kyiv at that time, quickly became popular in the capital.

A few years after relocating to Kyiv, they expanded, opening this location in an inconspicuous courtyard just off the central Khreshchatyk Street to keep up with demand. Another two restaurants followed. The branch I'm sitting in is three times larger than the original restaurant and can accommodate up to 300 people. This is handy considering the diverse clientele it attracts: everyone from office workers to soldiers, diplomats and visiting world leaders, including UK prime minister Keir Starmer. According to unconfirmed and vague information on social media, he ordered "a bit of everything".

Last year, a number of fancy restaurants, cafés and bakeries opened in Kyiv. There is a particular glut of Asian and Italian options. Besides that, there are many new "hipster" places selling the sorts of things you find in similar outlets all over the world. It's not always possible to find a free table at the good places. Despite the war, there is a strong desire for a full life with all its diverse flavours.

Even though Musafir is a hotspot that serves high-ranking officials, they still try to cook food the way mothers and grandmothers used to at home in Crimea: lagman, pilaf, chebureki. The waiters are dressed in traditional clothing, even if they are not actually Crimean Tatars. The women wear a dress over trousers, with an apron and a headscarf. The men wear a wide fabric belt. This is something that sets Musafir apart from the trendy new restaurants that are now serving, among other dishes, Crimean Tatar cuisine. These restaurants are more high-end and experimental, but their offerings and stylings aren't representative of a traditional Crimean restaurant.

Finally, coffee. It is prepared in a copper cezve and served in a small cup on a saucer, alongside finely chopped, hard home-made sugar, this isn't added to the drink itself though, instead you bite into it. The waiter will patiently and thoroughly explain how this coffee is traditionally drunk. It is better to follow this beautiful, old ritual. Nothing will be changed in this restaurant; they preserve what has existed for centuries. At a time of so much upheaval, that is very welcome. **FT**

Kristina Berdynskykh is a political journalist based in Kyiv. Jay Rayner is away

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* ANDY SEWELL • STYLING *by* GEORGIA RUDD

Recipe Club

A soup to ward off the weather

In parts of the UK it has rained every day in 2026. So, what to cook as we stare down the barrel of another stretch of dark, damp midweek suppers? Perhaps this kapusniak, aka sauerkraut soup: quick yet comforting; smoky yet tangy. It was recommended by a friend who'd discovered it on a Ukrainian recipe-a-month calendar. That version was vegetarian (see the tip below for details) whereas for this one chef Olia Hercules has added smoked pork for a richer base. "Cooked sauerkraut loses its live bacteria, but it is still tasty and full of fibre," says Hercules. Buy a few extra jars to liven up stews, sandwiches and meat dishes over the weeks to come. And make sure to read this week's guest restaurant review for a different perspective on what Ukrainians are eating this winter.
Harriet Fitch Little

DRINK
A full-bodied white wine or a Belgian-style witbier.

SUBSTITUTIONS
Mushroom or vegetable stock will work in place of chicken. This recipe calls for precooked smoked ribs, commonly found in eastern European grocers. (While you're there, pick up smetana and use in place of the crème fraîche.) If not using the ribs, double (or even triple) the quantity of pancetta.

TIP
If you choose to make this vegetarian, add 15g of dried mushrooms to give the soup more body and some butter for richness. You could also add rice or millet.

OLIA HERCULES'S KAPUSNIAK

TO SERVE SIX

- 2 tbs olive oil
- 100g slab of smoked pancetta, diced (see substitutions)
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 1 bay leaf
- A few allspice berries
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp coriander seeds, toasted and crushed
- 1 tsp caraway seeds, toasted and crushed
- 2 tbs tomato paste
- 500g sauerkraut, drained
- ½ tsp sugar
- 1.5l chicken stock
- 500g smoked ribs, cut into chunks (optional)
- 2 medium floury potatoes, unpeeled, diced

To serve
- Full-fat crème fraîche
- Dill, chopped
- A lemon

1. Heat the oil in a cast-iron casserole or whatever you use to make your stews and soups. Add the pancetta and fry until golden.
2. Add the onion, bay leaf and allspice, and cook for 3-4 minutes or until the onion is soft and translucent.
3. Add all the spices and the tomato paste and cook for another few minutes over a medium-low heat.
4. Add the sauerkraut and the sugar, and cook for a further few minutes, stirring.
5. Add the stock and the smoked ribs, if using, and then the potatoes. Cook until the potatoes are cooked through.
6. Serve with a swirl of crème fraîche, lots of chopped dill and a squeeze of lemon juice.

NEXT WEEK – A WEST AFRICAN FEAST

Project Kitchen

The slice is right

Layered potatoes are one of the unalloyed joys of winter cooking.

By *Tim Hayward*

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* KENNETH LAM

I am not sure how old I was when I first picked up an Elizabeth David book, but I know it was *French Country Cooking* and I was still young enough to have a deferential respect for authority figures. I remember my first recipe too. It was for gratin dauphinois. It's a terrific piece of writing, often quoted as an example of David's uncompromising, magisterial style and her *faites simple* philosophy of cooking.

It encouraged generations of food writers to turn out their own doctrinaire versions. I've no idea why thinly sliced potatoes should bring out the inherent screaming fundamentalism of otherwise delightful writers, but a "Dauph" recipe must, by convention, be a vigorously argued list of dos and don'ts. You must *never* have more than three layers of potato. What sort of unhinged barbarian would add cheese? (But you must cook down the cream until it takes on a mysterious cheesy nuttiness.) There must/must not be garlic/thyme. The slices must be washed to remove every trace of starch. Or no, they must never be rinsed; starch is vital to the thickening of the cream. It is imperative that the potato slices be pre-cooked in the cream, or absolutely unconscionable.

In truth, laminated potato dishes – by which I mean those constructed in layers, rather than anything to do with pastry technique – are an utterly brilliant idea that really rewards creative digression. The layered construction, combined with the flavouring liquid, means maximum flavour and textural impact from a cheap starch. The gentle steaming/poaching of the dish's interior plus the fat-enhanced semi-frying of the outer surfaces is a combination in which the human animal is hard-wired to exalt. Laminated potato dishes are a balm to the senses. I kind of wish we'd collectively chosen some other dish to be fascistic about.

THE OG GRATIN DAUPHINOIS

Here's a basic recipe for a reliable gratin dauphinois, as simple and as non-dictatorial as I can make it. What we shall refer to as the Davidian Commandments are added in brackets for anyone looking for an authority greater than my own.

- *1kg potatoes*
- *50g butter*
- *1 clove garlic*
- *Pepper and salt to taste*
- *500g single cream*

1. Peel your potatoes ["kipfler and the pink fir-apple make a gratin lighter and also more authentic than that made with routine commercial King Edwards or Majestics which are in every respect second best"].
2. Slice them thinly ["no thicker than a penny"] then rinse in cold water and dry off with a cloth.
3. Layer into a dish that has been well buttered ["and rubbed with garlic"], seasoning between each layer.
4. Pour over the cream and dot ["strew"] the top with butter.
5. Cook at 150C until soft throughout when tested with a knife, about 90 minutes.
6. Turn the oven up to maximum for 10 minutes to get a good crust on top.

David also points out that this is "a rich and filling regional dish from the Dauphiné" so destroying any remaining myth that it's anything to do with *Le Roi Soleil*'s eldest son. Or dolphins.

It is a gorgeous recipe. Utterly simple. It plays up the potato-ness of the basic ingredient, and what's not to love about a pint of cream? Most importantly, the finished result seamlessly combines the steamy, creamy interior texture with a browned and caramelised top. That's the whole point of a Dauph.

Julia Child, who I must confess I later found infinitely more jolly than David, slathered cheese on top of her Dauph. Richard Olney – the American writer who matched David in uncompromising doctrinal purity – parboiled his potatoes in milk and was a zealot of the "no rinse" wing. To be fair, when it finally came down to it, he baulked at calling his a dauphinois and went with "scalloped potatoes" instead, which seems dangerously like equivocation.

What's important to take from this recipe, though, is the "double" cooking. The slow, gentle baking of the potatoes in the liquid and then the last burst of heat to *gratinée*. While we're being pedantic, *gratinée* is the French term for broiling grated breadcrumbs or cheese to create a crust. It is common then to refer to this as a gratin dauphinois, but I don't believe it's strictly correct and I don't like it. See? Now I'm doing it too!

POMMES ANNA

Somewhere in the back of a cupboard, I have a proper Pommes Anna pot. It is old, heavy and copper, about 20cm across, 10cm high with straight sides and a lid that fits loosely over the top. On both sides, the handles are brass "ears". The idea was to pack the thing with layer upon layer of potatoes and butter, stick it in the oven until it fried in its own fat and then flip it over so it sat on the lid. If you didn't end up with massive burns all up your forearms, you'd die within hours from consuming a block of carbs and fat the size and texture of a small fruitcake. It's a beautiful, quirky, historical reminder of what could be achieved with potatoes if you had servants and didn't mind scalding them.

But the basic idea of enriching potatoes with butter, steaming the insides so they're fluffy and frying the outside crisp is still compelling. If it wasn't, we wouldn't have chips. So this recipe makes a much more manageable Pommes Anna by separating the two cooking phases. You'll need some particular gear. No, not a ridiculously expensive copper pot but a sponge tin, plus a plate, or some other weight that fits inside it, and some baking parchment. (I use a round chef's press which fits neatly inside a 20cm sponge tin, but a plate-and-weight arrangement will also work.)

- *1kg of potatoes. The fine English general-purpose spud the Maris Piper is excellent here*
- *100g butter, melted*
- *Pepper and salt to taste*
- *Fresh thyme*

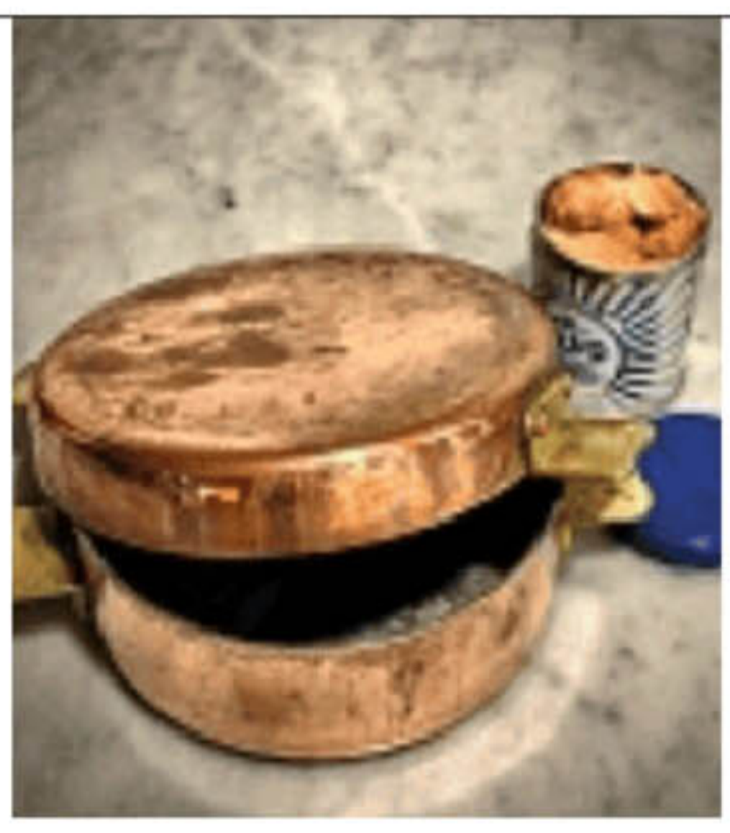
1. Peel your potatoes and slice them 1mm thick. Use a mandoline if you can. It can be done with a knife, but you'll go mad with frustration and boredom. You might also be able to use a cheese plane, or your box grater might have a slicing blade on one side.
2. Paint melted butter on the inside of your tin, then lay in a disc of baking parchment. Put another layer of butter on top of this,

TIM HAYWARD'S PREFERRED POTATOES

TIM HAYWARD

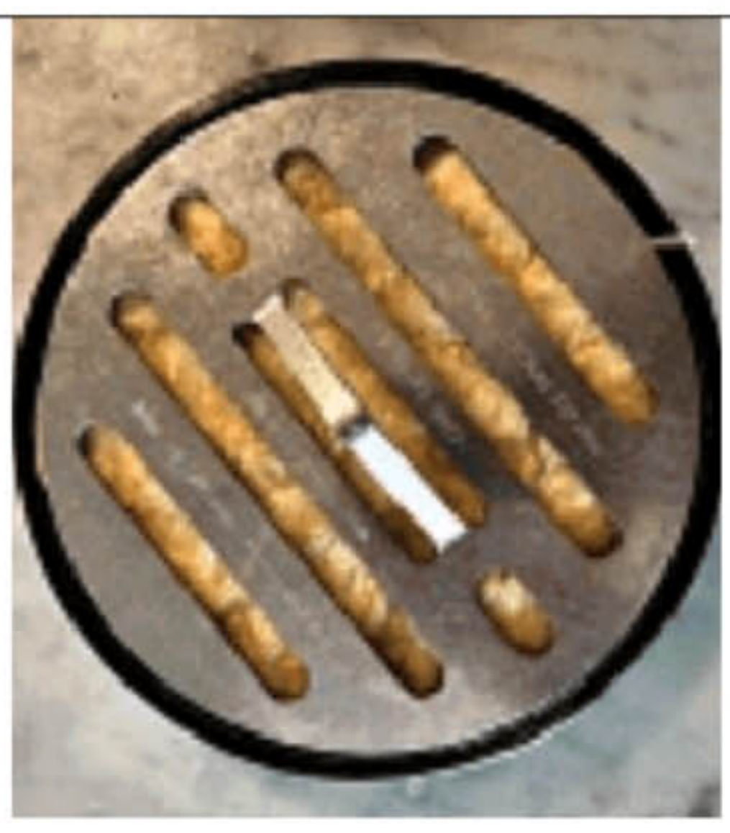
The only thing better than serving your guests a leek-and-bacon enriched savoyarde is giving them a dauphinoise alongside to compare and contrast.

OK, I might be stretching a little here, but I reckon the ultimate laminated potato dish with maximum inclusions could be a traditional Lancashire hotpot. We can't let the French have all the fun.



Here's the old Pommes Anna pot. Not strictly necessary for a modern version, but I had the servants polish it up, nonetheless.

After the 'confitting', the first stage of cooking, the Pommes Anna can be refrigerated or frozen. The chilled butter holds everything together in anticipation of frying.



I do this so often now that I've rather refined the kit. This is a circular 'Chef's Press' and my nan's old sponge tin.

I always thought 'draws admiring gasps' was an overclaim, until I wheeled this one out in front of guests.

then lay in your potato slices. I start in the middle, then work outwards, but this is very much a matter of aesthetics. This layer is going to be the top of the finished dish.

3. Paint on another layer of butter, season with pepper, salt and some fresh thyme, and then lay in another layer of potatoes. These don't need to be as neatly arranged as no one will see them.
4. Repeat until you've built up four or five layers, then pour over any remaining butter. Place another disc of parchment paper on top, followed by your weight.
5. Cook at 180C for 45 minutes, then allow to cool before refrigerating, which will set potato and butter into a solid mass that can be turned out on to a plate. At this point, you can, if you wish, freeze the potato disc. I make these in batches, and they're always a delight to discover in the freezer. Solid frisbees of joy.
6. To finish, remove the parchment paper from the top of your turned-out disc and invert it once more so it's top-down in a hot, very lightly buttered skillet. Let it sit for a minute or two, and then take a gentle peek at the underside using a spatula to lift the edge. If things are holding together nicely (it might need a little coaxing), it should get free enough to slide. Now place the skillet in a 200C oven for 10 minutes. Finally, carefully drain off any excess butter, then put a plate on top of your pommes and invert the whole thing one last time.

It may well be the most beautiful and satisfying thing you've ever seen, and if anyone points out that with all your diligent work you've created a "big French hash brown", clobber them with the skillet.

And yes, we have just bumped up the richness of our potato laminate by an order of magnitude by adding enough butter to plug the aorta of a rhino, but as Julia Child put it… "If you're afraid of butter, use cream."

THE CLASSIC POTATO LAMINATES

- GRATIN DAUPHINOIS should be just potatoes, butter and cream
- POMMES ANNA is potatoes and butter instead of cream
- POMMES BOULANGÈRE adds onions to the dauph and is cooked in stock or bouillon instead of cream
- POMMES SAVOYARDE is a boulangère plus cheese
- JANSSON'S TEMPTATION is a dauph interleaved with onions and pickled sprats

Any of the above can be successfully achieved with celeriac or a combination of potato and celeriac.

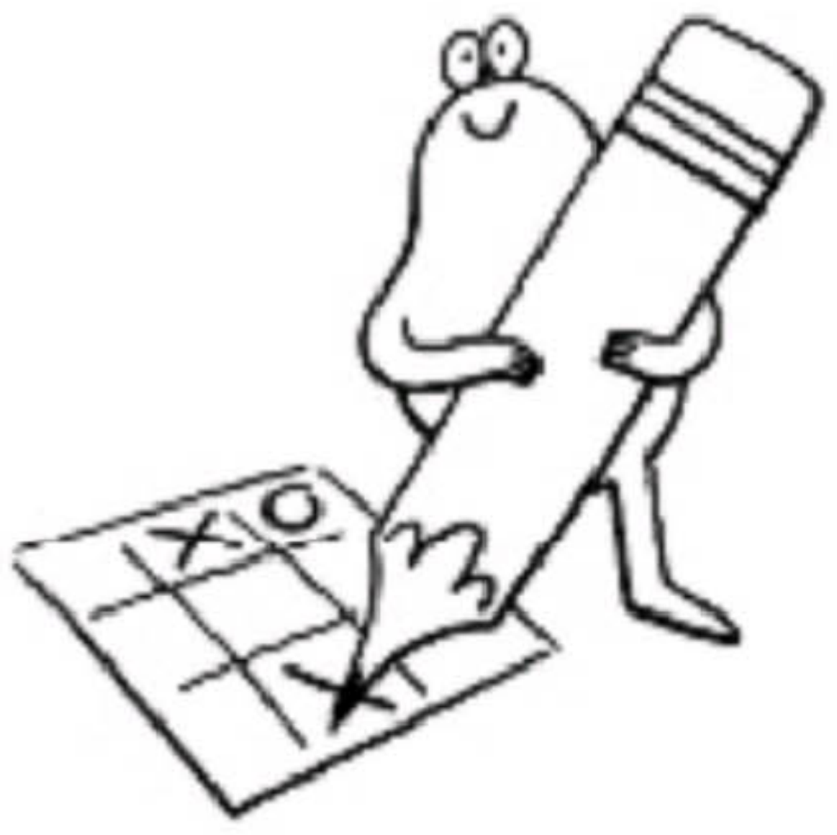
Many restaurants now serve pressed, layered, mandolined potatoes. These are confitted in butter, in advance in huge pans, then fried "off" à la minute for service. These are not "hash browns" as you might suppose, but can technically be regarded as the irritating millennial offspring of Anna.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

This version doesn't have a French name, possibly because it does all the things that are, at some point, considered wrong or possibly because it is my own invention. In this case, our cooking liquid is less rich than pure cream, but we claw back the lipids by adding forbidden cheese. This recipe also addresses the vexed question of "inclusions". In Sweden, they have a marvellous Dauph-adjacent dish called Janssons frestelse (Jansson's temptation) that sneaks pickled sprats between the potato layers. You could theoretically use anchovies but hey! Bacon! What isn't improved by bacon?

- *The white parts of four medium-sized leeks, shredded*
- *200g milk*
- *200g cream*
- *1kg waxy potatoes, peeled and thinly sliced*
- *5 rashers of smoked streaky bacon, chopped, or a pack of lardons*
- *300g gruyère, grated*

1. Drop the bacon into a hot pan and fry gently until browned, but not crisp. Lift out the bacon, but keep the fat in the pan. Lower the temperature a little, then add the shredded white parts of the leeks to gently "sweat". Keep stirring; the idea is to cook the leeks for about 20 minutes without them taking any colour at all. This breaks down their structure and mellows and sweetens the flavour.
2. Add the milk and cream and drop to a very low simmer for another 20 minutes before transferring everything to a blender and reducing to a smooth sauce. (If you're still feeling pedantic, you've just made a bacon-infused leek "soubise" – an utterly gorgeous sauce, particularly with roast chicken.) It should be the consistency of emulsion paint, so if it's thicker, add more milk. I like to pass the liquid through a sieve, but that's not strictly necessary.
3. From here on, we know what to do. Rub your dish with garlic if you feel you must, butter it wildly and start laying in the potatoes. Each time you finish a layer, sprinkle on some bacon bits and some of the grated gruyère. Season with pepper, but be sparing with the salt; remember there's plenty in the bacon.
4. Once you've placed your last potato layer, pour over the soubise. Take it slowly and help to coax it down the sides of the potatoes with a palette knife. Bake at 150C for an hour, then sprinkle the last of the cheese across the top, dot with butter and crank the oven up full for a glistening, crisp, gratinéed crust. FT



GAMES

MINI CROSSWORD

NO 98 SET BY XELA

8 clues:
2 straightforward
2 general knowledge
2 cryptic
2 anagrams

1		2		3		4
	■		■		■	
5						
	■		■		■	
6						
	■		■		■	
7						

ACROSS

1 Heckle (7)
5 Neat and tidy hospital worker (7)
6 Start in (7)
7 Member of the family walks over (7)

DOWN

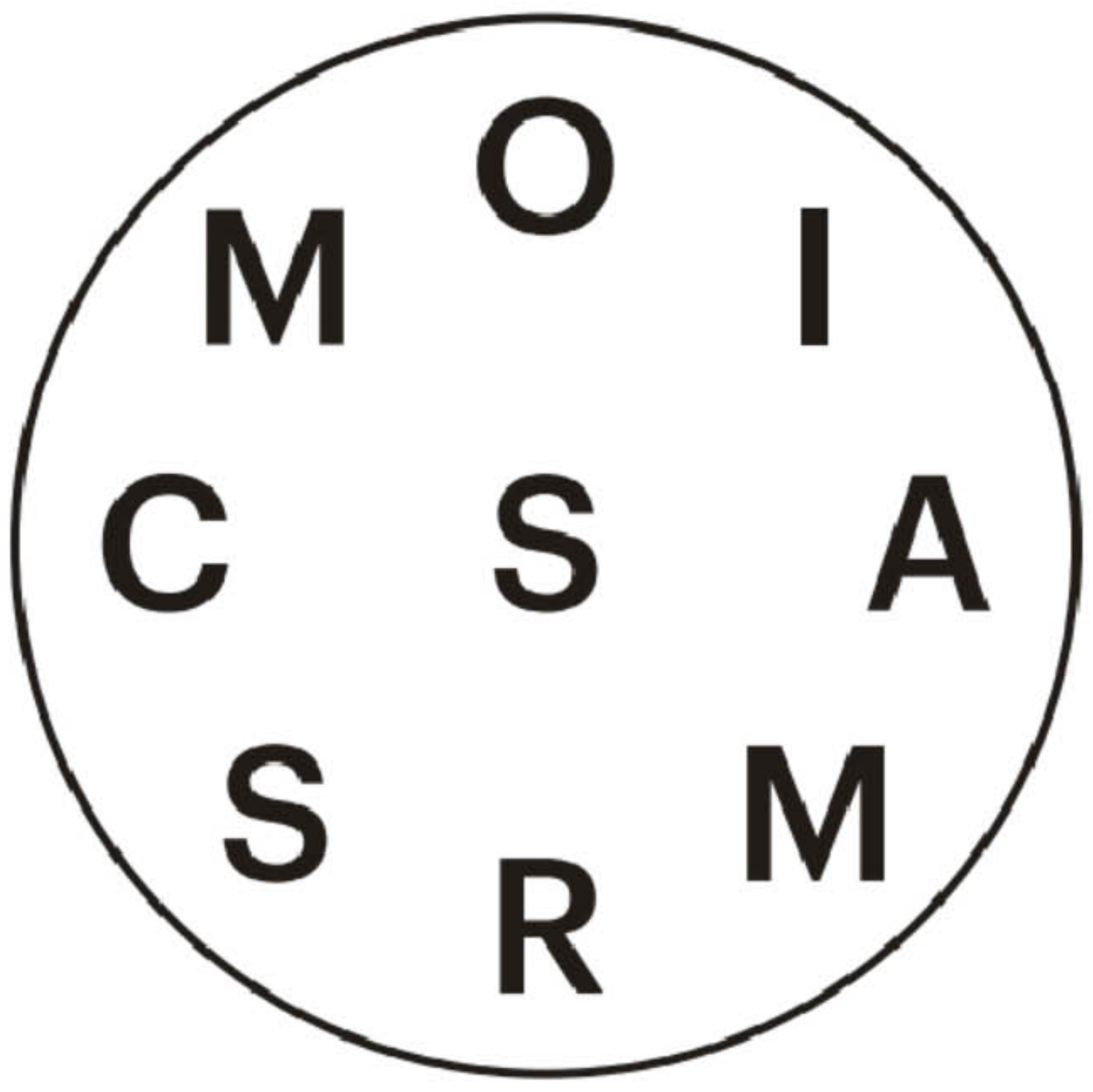
1 19th-century literary sisters (7)
2 A tirade (7)
3 Collars (7)
4 Superman's home planet (7)

Access FT crosswords from the past 30 days – Cryptic, Polymath, Weekend and Sunday Puzzles – on ft.com/crosswordapp

WORD CIRCLE

NO 98

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is one word that uses all nine letters.



SCORING
GOOD – 25
GREAT – 30
AMAZING – 40

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 98

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

1	0			0			
0	0	1	0		1	0	1
	1	1			0		
		1			1	0	
0	1	1		1	1	0	0
			1			0	0

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THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS

A round on the links

The link was people or things that can be super

1. Nova Scotia 2. *The Golden Bowl* 3. *Star Wars* 4. "Heroes" 5. New Model Army 6. Isle of Man 7. Mario Cuomo 8. Battersea Power Station 9. The League of Nations 10. Ego

The picture round

Antonia Romeo + Juliet Stevenson = Romeo and Juliet

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE FEBRUARY 21

Mini Crossword No 97

C	R	A	S	H	E	D
A	■	L	■	O	■	Y
B	R	A	C	K	E	N
I	■	R	■	U	■	A
N	E	M	E	S	I	S
E	■	E	■	A	■	T
T	E	D	D	I	E	S

Binary Puzzle No 97

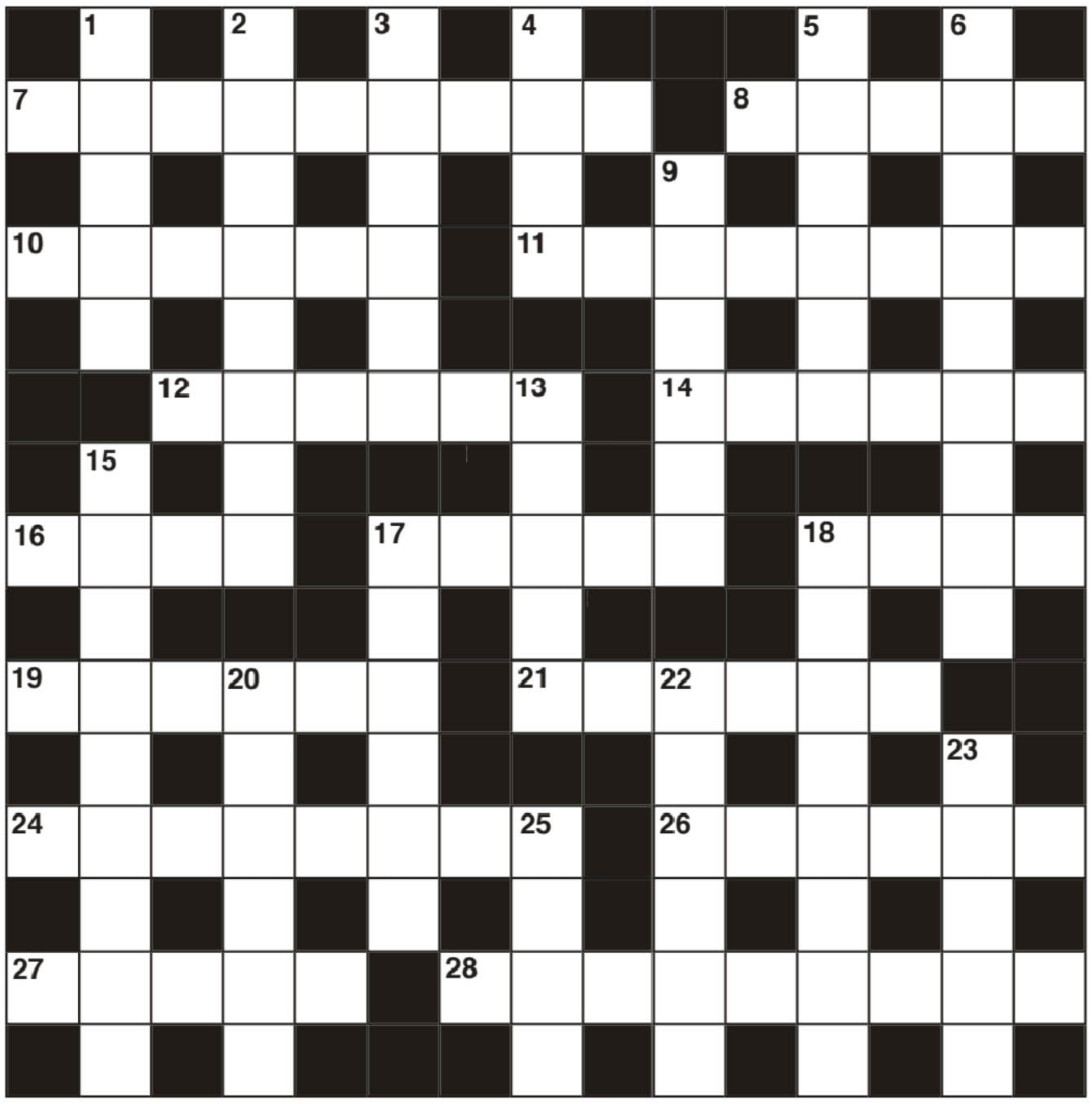
0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0

Word Circle No 97

ahem, ahems, ash, ashed, ashen, dash, dish, had, hail, hailed, hails, hale, haled, hales, ham, hams, hand, handle, handles, hands, has, head, heads, heal, heals, held, helm, helms, hem, hems, hen, hens, hes, hid, hide, hides, hie, hied, hies, him, hims, hind, hinds, his, inhale, inhaled, inhales, lash, lashed, leash, mash, mashed, mesh, **mishandle** shad, shade, shale, sham, shame, shamed, she, shed, shied, shield, shim, shin, shine, shined

THE CROSSWORD

NO 782 SET BY ALDHELM



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

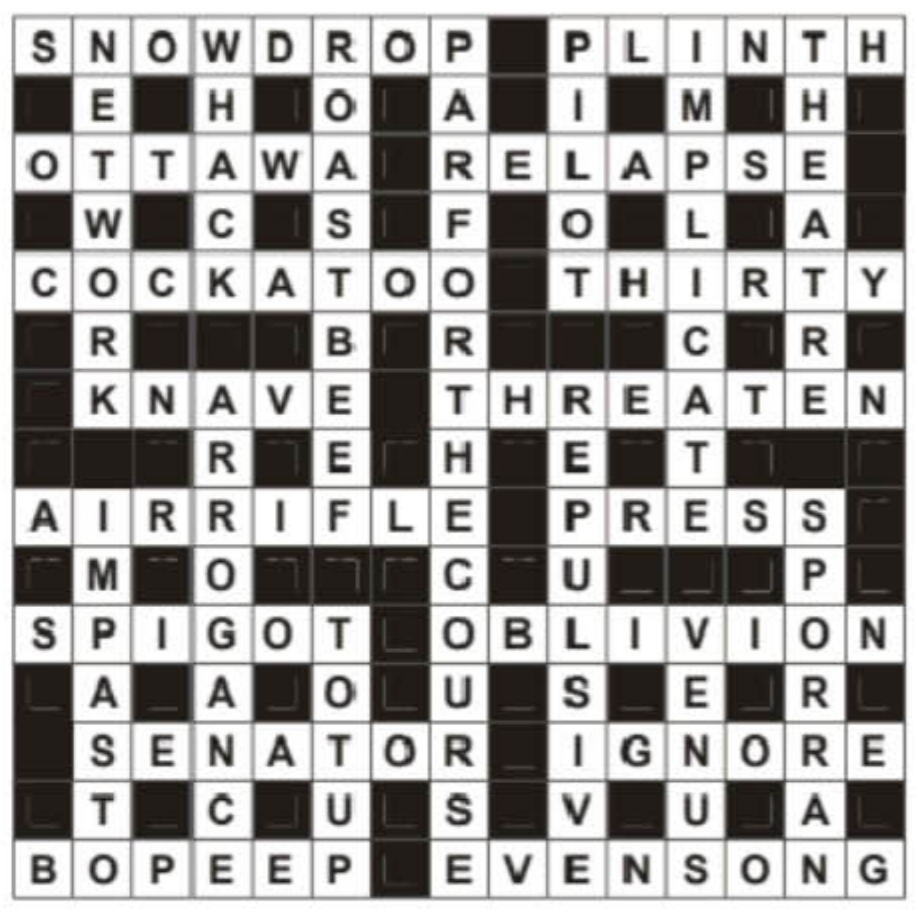
ACROSS

7 New York City island (9)
8 Take it easy (5)
10 Occur (6)
11 Natural illumination (8)
12 Astute (6)
14 Choice (6)
16 Miss out (4)
17 Sufficient (5)
18 Drop, go down (4)
19 Skilful (6)
21 Large-billed tropical bird (6)
24 Worshipped (8)
26 Accompany (6)
27 Sightless (5)
28 Cautious, hesitant (9)

DOWN

1 German agreement to criticise Asian country (5)
2 Quick cut that's repeated (4, 4)
3 Position can't be altered in empty space (6)
4 Ratify permit (4)
5 Counter is in recess (6)
6 Hire purchase stops actions changing source of money (9)
9 Once shifted about again! (6)
13 Head of operations in department store (5)
15 Run desk badly and go off (9)
17 Constable, perhaps, starts to arrest rogue traders – it's complicated (6)
18 Caught computers etc in frightening shortage (8)
20 Begin organising online journal taking new shape (6)
22 Familiar with duets composed by orchestra's leader (4, 2)
23 Show's over, unfortunately, after first part of play (5)
25 Fight expected over last of oil (4)

Crossword No 781



S	N	O	W	D	R	O	P		P	L	I	N	T	H
	E		H		O		A		I		M		H	
O	T	T	A	W	A		R	E	L	A	P	S	E	
	W		C		S		F		O		L		A	
C	O	C	K	A	T	O	O		T	H	I	R	T	Y
	R				B		R				C		R	
	K	N	A	V	E		T	H	R	E	A	T	E	N
			R		E		H		E		T			
A	I	R	R	I	F	L	E		P	R	E	S	S	
	M		O				C		U				P	
S	P	I	G	O	T		O	B	L	I	V	I	O	N
	A		A		O		U		S		E		R	
	S	E	N	A	T	O	R		I	G	N	O	R	E
	T		C		U		S		V		U		A	
B	O	P	E	E	P		E	V	E	N	S	O	N	G

GETTY IMAGES

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON

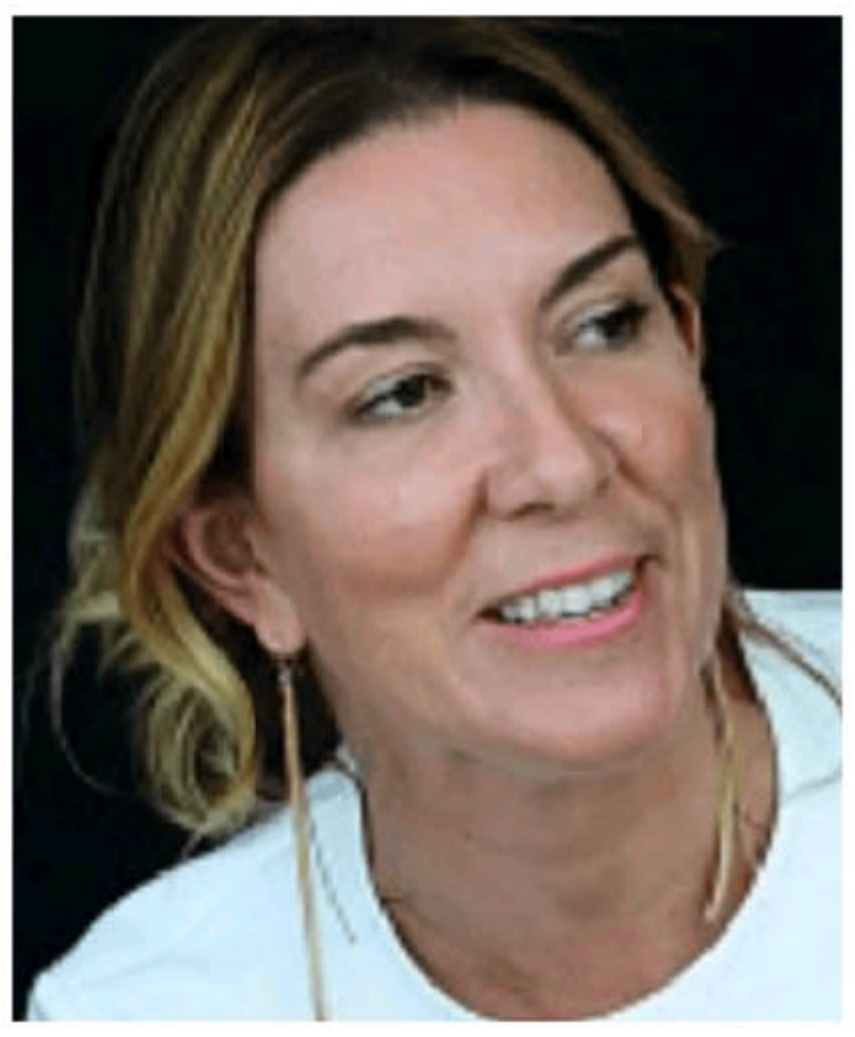
All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1 What is the second smallest Canadian province?
2 Which 1904 novel by Henry James takes its title from an object first seen in the book in a London bric-à-brac shop?
3 What was the highest-grossing film of the 1970s worldwide?
4 Which David Bowie (pictured) song – now one of his most famous – only reached number 24 in the UK singles charts when it was released in 1977?
5 What was the name of the standing army founded by the Parliamentarians in 1645 and led by Oliver Cromwell from 1650?
6 Tynwald is the parliament of which island?
7 Which 20th-century governor of New York was the father of Andrew Cuomo, a 21st-century governor of New York?
8 Which London building was completed in 1955, fully decommissioned from its original function in 1983 and is now a residential, office and retail complex with its own Tube station?
9 President Woodrow Wilson won the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize "for his role as founder of" what?
10 What's the Latin for "I" (as in "myself")?

THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



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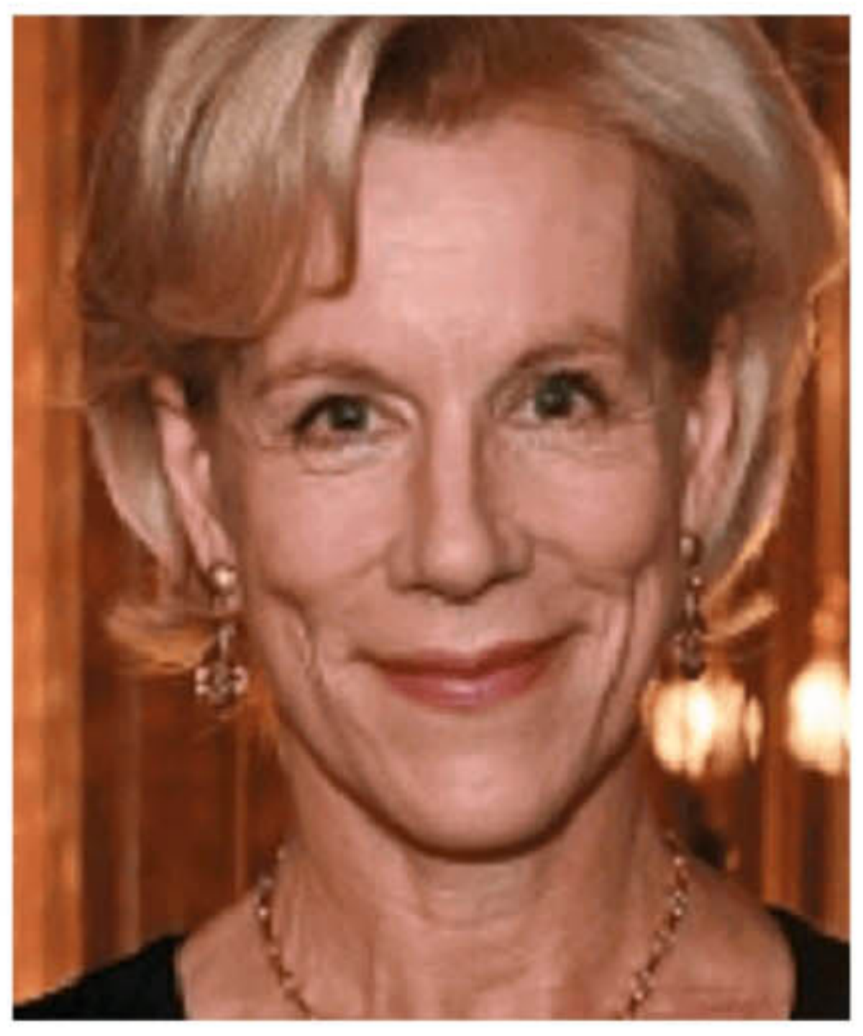

= ?

Answers opposite

What Fresh Hell

Have you got your 10,000 steps in?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*

You can always recognise these people. You see them pacing as you wait with them for a lift. Or moving back and forth at the station, every stride chipping away at the target. Why waste five minutes standing still on a District line platform when you could probably knock off a cheeky few hundred steps?

You just know that if they've managed only 9,700 by the time they get home, they will be pacing the kitchen until their counter hits five figures. And, of course, they are only too happy, desperate even, to explain this erratic behaviour. "I'm getting my steps in," they'll tell you, smiling away at their own virtue and announcing their success with all the gravity of a quarterly earnings call.

It's obviously a good thing, but once upon a time we just referred to it as walking. Now, that's far too self-indulgent. Going out at lunchtime "for a walk" marks you out as a bit of a dilettante, someone who is probably using the time to write a sonnet or listen to *The Rest is History*. But getting your steps, well, that suggests a person of purpose, action, metrics.

Until recently, this was just another alien tribe to me, but the recovery instructions from a minor leg operation specified that I join the 10k steppers. I am adult enough to know that this is not a scientific target. Nine thousand would do the job. The requirement is designed to get me up from my chair rather than sell smartwatches. Indeed the 10k target sprang from a 1960s ad campaign for a Japanese pedometer. But it is more motivational than "walk a lot".

And, like Parkrun or Strava, it also offers opportunities to announce your commitment to health. It's a little like those people who, unasked, volunteer the news that they went on a 10-mile run at the weekend, only less impressive. Actually, I find the answer to the "I ran 10 miles" boast is to ask sympathetically if there were no buses. The joggers seek out others to impress in the future.

But suddenly, I have become one of those pointless pacers I mentioned earlier. There are only so many steps in my commute, even walking as I now do to the further train station. But a lap around the newsroom will get me another 200. Do it five times a day, spaced out so as not to look demented, and that's a thousand steps. I've always considered the three-minute walk from the tube to my office to be a negligible distance, but I know now it's worth nearly 400 steps. With a slight detour to Pret, there and back is another thousand. That's 20 per cent of my target ticked off without actually doing anything.

> Going out at lunchtime to get your steps – that suggests a person of purpose, action, metrics

Are you bored yet? Because I can go on. Seriously, you don't want to test me on this. I can be even less interesting than I am when I go on a diet. Ask me how many steps to the high street and back. Go on, I dare you. The dog ought to be of value here but she stops so often that she's still not the most efficient use of my minutes. The other frustration is that my phone lags a bit in counting so I always worry I might do more by accident and I'm not allowed to carry them over.

But where do stepcasters (pedo-people has too much scope for misunderstanding) stand in the pantheon of domestic bores? Certainly higher than people who talk too much about their children or show pictures of their pets. There are at least people who like pets – and children, come to think of it. They are also worse than general exercise bores. A proper workout is, at least, demanding and so perhaps earns a brief boast, if you are the kind of person who considers sweating an achievement. (Former Prince Andrew, perhaps.)

The steppers are, I think, better than diet bores. This is because in the end there is not that much you can say after the first announcement, whereas those who are trying to lose weight have masses of information with which to try your patience and are routinely impossible when you dine out.

I'm not sure where Ozempic bores stand in this hierarchy. People are interested in the side-effects and how it's working for you, but then again all you did was get an injection. And I wouldn't go round telling others about my flu jab.

The solution clearly lies in one of those Covid-style slogans to guide us on the etiquette. Something like "step out, count off, shut up". Think of them as your marching orders. FT

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EMAIL ROBERT *at* MAGAZINELETTERS@FT.COM

★★★★

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★★★★

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